

SURVIVAL
IN ANOTHER
WORLD WITH MY
MISTRESS

2 written by **RYUTO**
NOVEL illustrated by **YAPPEN**

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SURVIVAL IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY MISTRESS

NOVEL
2

WRITTEN BY **Ryuto**
ILLUSTRATED BY **Yappen**



Seven Seas Entertainment

Goshuzinsama to yuku isekai survival Vol. 2
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Prologue:

Survival in the Great Omitt Badlands

HHEY, EVERYBODY. Kousuke here, everyone's favorite survivor in another world, coming to you live from the Omitt Badlands. What am I doing? Well, y'know.

"Kousuke, put a marker here," Sir Leonard said.

"Comin' right up!" I replied, using my jumping technique to stack three brick blocks underneath me. I then stuck a torch on top.

Now we'd have a nice, clear view of the perimeter, even in darkness. I used brick blocks instead of wood blocks because I didn't want gizmas to be able to break them so easily. I had a feeling that wood blocks wouldn't stand a chance against their charges.

I could've cut out the middleman and destroyed the bottom two blocks, leaving just the top one there. But I felt wary about leaving a bunch of clear breaches of physics all over the place. Granted, the results would be the same if the gizmas destroyed the blocks.

After I finished placing the torch, I jumped down from three meters up and placed a wood block under my feet before I landed—just a two-meter jump, really. Thanks to the buffer, I wouldn't twist my ankle and become zombie fodder like that one unlucky anime high-schooler. Anything higher would be a bit dicey, though.

"I've seen him do this so many times, but I still find it utterly bizarre," Madame Zamil remarked.

Jagheera shrugged. "You've got to expect the unexpected from him."

I think it's the other way around—you're way too easygoing about all of this.

"That makes six markers. Are we up for going a bit farther?" Sylphy asked.

"Yes, I believe we could even if we *weren't* soldiers," Sir Leonard replied.

"Okay, then let's keep going for a bit longer."

And so our foray into the badlands stretched on a bit longer. *Well, we were planning to place about two more markers anyway.*

“I must say, Kousuke has quite the...flexible way of thinking,” Madame Zamil said. I couldn’t tell whether her voice carried a note of admiration or exasperation. Maybe both.

“Building a road through the badlands to put up a fortress in the middle of nowhere sure is an unusual idea.” Jagheera’s tone was similar.

That was precisely why we’d all come out here to the Great Omitt Badlands. We were going to forge a safe path through the badlands and build a fortress with suitable defenses. This was the first move I had proposed toward reclaiming the Kingdom of Merinard.

It all started two days ago...

“I want to start working toward reclaiming the Kingdom of Merinard,” Sylphy declared during an assembly at our usual meeting place. Responses were varied.

Danan, the former royal guard for the Kingdom of Merinard, crossed his arms with a serious look on his face. His huge bull’s horns complemented his deeply furrowed brow.

Melty, the gal with the curly horns and long (if abruptly ended) civil service career, looked up in thought with a hand to her cheek.

Ira had her large eye sleepily half-opened like usual. She was a true scholar, a brilliant alchemist, and a potent spellcaster worthy of Merinard’s Order of Mages.

The fox-faced man, Cuvi, wore an amused smile. He didn’t have the distinguished work history that the rest of the gang could bring to bear, but he could outpace and outmaneuver the best scouts the royal army could muster in its heyday. Despite appearances, the dude was *strong*. I’d heard that he came up out of the slums; clearly it hadn’t taken the toll on him that it did most folks.

Then there was Sir Leonard, his lion’s face twisted up in a self-satisfied grin.

He'd once been a member of Merinard's nobility and a famous warrior as well. Soldiers quaked in their boots at the mention of Leonard the Twin-Fanged.

Madame Zamil, the lizardfolk, studied Sylphy's face, her own expression unreadable. She had once instructed people in spearmanship back in Merinard, and it was said that her skill as a fighter matched Sir Leonard's.

Lastly, there was the ogre, Shemel, who had once been a highly ranked adventurer, wearing the most savage expression out of everyone. She had red skin and two horns growing out of her hairline. She was huge, somewhere in the neighborhood of two and a half meters—even bigger than Danan and more than enough to make me look like a shrimp at 175 centimeters.

Between these folks, Sylphy, and yours truly, we made a council of nine.

Cuvi was the first to voice his opinion. "Aww, Her Highness is finally in good spirits again."

"I'm all for it. I'm fed up with those pigs from the Holy Kingdom looking down on us." That made two yeses from Cuvi and Shemel.

"I, too, support this endeavor. We cannot allow them to continue trampling the soil of our motherland," Sir Leonard said.

"My spear is at the ready for whatever our princess desires," Madame Zamil chimed in.

"I would also like to vote in favor," said Danan. "But, realistically speaking, there are just too many problems that need solving first—most importantly, whether any of said problems are *solvable*." Knowing the importance of his position, Danan was being wary.

Well, he has a point. I've only been in this world about two weeks now, and even I can come up with at least three things that would need to be addressed.

"It will take time to gather enough supplies to be ready for war. Even if we manage to secure aid from the elves, there's a limit to how much they will help us. We've already put a huge strain on their village." Melty shook her head, a frown on her gorgeous face.

She was in charge of distributing rations to the three-hundred-plus citizens of

Merinard who were here in the elves' village. It seemed they were barely scraping by as it was; there was no way we could afford to stock up for a war. I had to agree.

"We'll be fine if we just use Kousuke's powers," Ira said, having read Sylphy's and my intentions.

"Exactly. To speak plainly, Kousuke's the key to solving all of our problems," Sylphy said, then turned to me. "Kousuke, I feel bad for relying on you so much, but I need your help."

"I'll gladly do whatever I can." There was a limit to how much I could do. Probably. It was important to be cautious just in case.

"Then let's itemize our issues. The first one I can think of is the Great Omitt Badlands." Everyone present nodded at Sylphy's words.

"If I remember correctly, it takes about ten days to cross on foot. We should set out at sunrise, find a place where we can set up a base while it's still daylight, and build it. Basically, we should be making fortresses," I suggested.

There were many ways to protect oneself when going out exploring in survival games, and the safest and most reliable one was to build a base. It had to be a safe building with the necessary furniture for spending the night. It was also good to have stockpiles of food and medicine as well as spare weapons and such, in case of emergencies.

"That's easier said than done, but..." Danan chuckled awkwardly.

Melty's lips tugged up in a smile. "With Kousuke, that might actually be possible."



Uh, Melty, you're scaring me with that look.

"If we *are* going to do this, then let's build a road as well. If we can send a wagon back and forth, we can transport supplies without having to rely solely on Kousuke," she said.

"Are you serious?" You want me to make a highway that's six blocks wide and long enough for a ten-day walk? Absolutely not! I'd never have enough time or materials!

"We can worry about the road later," Sylphy cut in. "It could be used as a route for invasion. We should focus on that *after* we reclaim the kingdom."

I knew I could count on my mistress! Uh, wait a minute. Worry about it later? Does that mean she's hoping I'll build it at some point in the future? Best not to think about it. Yeah.

"We'll walk during the day and spend the night encamped in a new fortress. That way we have a genuine shot at making it through the Great Omitt Badlands without incident," Sir Leonard said.

"But gizmas don't just attack at night. We don't know how safe we'll be on the road," Shemel pointed out.

"We'll just have to bring enough people who can fight along with us, then. Luckily, we've got those crossbows Kousuke made for us. Based on the body count everyone racked up during the gizma raid the other night, they work well for just about anyone. We'll manage one way or another," Madame Zamil said.

The three of them were the warriors of our group, and I was inclined to follow their lead. *Still, we'll be in big trouble if we get ambushed, no matter how many extra fighters we've got along for the ride.*

"We can use harpies as scouts during the day too. We'll manage," Ira added, as if anticipating my concerns.

Ahh, harpy scouts. Harpies had extremely good eyesight. They'd be a great asset out in the badlands, given that there was hardly any place to take shelter. That said, their night vision wasn't great—all the more reason to hunker down in the evenings.

“Totally.” Cuvi nodded in agreement. “As long as we can have the harpies playing spotter and marking targets, we can riddle them with bolts.”

He was on the right track. If our people were strapped up with crossbows, they’d be able to turn any gizma into Swiss cheese before it got too close.

“While there will be many difficulties in store, first things first: We’re going to wind up using a lot of clay. I need as much as possible, so could someone please make sure I get it?”

“Very well. I shall stockpile food as well,” Melty said.

“And I’ll see if I can get the elders to increase our share of rations,” Sylphy offered.

Far north of the Black Forest, where Kousuke and his companions lived, an armored knight was giving a report to a squat man inside a castle. The rotund fellow was dressed in the pure white garments of a priest with ornate golden embroidery. His ensemble spoke volumes about his status.

“So, did you manage to quell the attacks by those hideous bugs?”

“Yes, sir. We effectively utilized Your Excellency’s strategy and repelled them without sustaining any grievous injuries.”

“Heh, is that so?” A gleeful grin spread across the archbishop’s face. His plan to lure out the gizmas, along with the elderly and wounded from their stock of demi-humans, had worked.

“What should we do about the survivors?” the knight asked.

“Finish them. Make their departure as painless as possible.”

Leaving them alive would be a waste of resources. Surely they would be satisfied, having served us humans until their last breaths. May their virtuous deeds suffice to earn them the right to be born as humans in their next lives.

“How do our soldiers fare?”

“Morale is high, and they have plenty of experience now.”

“In that case, let us continue to the next phase.”

“And what might that entail, Your Excellency?”

“Your target shall be the Black Forest across the Great Omitt Badlands. Gather your troops and resources and make ready.”

“Yes, sir! You can count on me!” The knight clapped a hand to his chest in salute before turning on his heel to leave the office.

“Mwa ha ha... The Witch of the Black Forest is not to be feared. Even if she is a witch, she’s still just one woman. We should be able to do something about her.”

The rotund archbishop cackled in his opulent office. There was the soft sound of a water droplet splashing, but the archbishop didn’t notice it over the sound of his laughter.

Chapter 1:

Let's Make an Exploration Base in the Badlands!

WE PREPARED TO DEPART for the Great Omitt Badlands to scout and construct a base. Our party consisted of me, Sylphy, Sir Leonard, Madame Zamil, Jagheera the cat beastfolk scout, and Pirna the harpy scout. Pirna was flying ahead of us.

"I must say, Kousuke, this bolt-action rifle is amazing!"

"Don't start shooting at everything that moves, now. I don't have a reliable way of producing the bullets yet. Also, make sure you pick up the cartridges after you fire them."

"I know, I know." Jagheera grinned with her infantry rifle in hand. It was one of the three bolt-action rifles I'd made for our expedition. I had another, and the final one was in my inventory as a backup weapon.

It was a 7.92mm-caliber, magazine-fed rifle with a five-shot clip. The gun was 1,100 millimeters long and weighed 3.9 kilograms. It had four-groove, right-hand twist rifling. The initial velocity of the muzzle was more than twice the speed of sound at 760 meters per second, and its effective range was 500 meters.

Bolt-action firearms like this one were durable and highly reliable. The design was... Well, I wasn't enough of a gun nerd to be able to distinguish between these kinds of rifles. However, it was famous enough. It was the kind used by Short-stache's country during World War II.

It would be hard to mass-produce these at present. Making one of these took eight whole hours. It could be possible if I made more workbenches and had them all crafting guns at once, but that was easier said than done. And that was to say nothing about the material cost.

I was fairly certain I would need to upgrade the workbench somehow. I could try to push through with sheer numbers, since I had no idea how to do the next upgrade for the workbenches yet. I assumed I'd have to acquire some kind of motive power. Perhaps I could make something like a steam engine, building off

of a water wheel or windmill. I made a mental note to ask Ira whether there was some kind of magical engine we could slap together.

I had a moderate amount of lead, copper, and zinc, which were all necessary for making the bullets and cartridges. However, that made ammunition for two or three guns at best. I didn't have nearly enough to keep two to three hundred guns loaded.

On the other hand, I was able to make far more gunpowder than I'd anticipated. Gathering soil from the bathroom was incredibly arduous work, but thanks to everyone, I'd been able to build up a healthy stock of gunpowder. It was truly a win-win. Explosions were so cool!

"I find those weapons to be extremely noisy. They aren't to my taste in the slightest," Sir Leonard said.

"I don't like them either," Madame Zamil agreed.

Evidently, they weren't fans of the bolt-action rifles. Maybe they had a gut feeling that these weapons would drive warriors and knights like them to extinction. Once dozens or even hundreds of these were made, a valor was transformed into an antiquated curio.

"I admit their power amazes me." Sylphy didn't like how loud it was either, since her long ears were so sensitive. The sound of a gun going off must have been too much for her.

Speaking of which, these guns were powerful enough to take down a gizma in *two shots*—that was how much of a game changer they were. Jagheera and I shot one bullet each at a gizma's head, and that was all it took to kill it. Its partner met the same fate. From the looks of things, that level of lethality didn't drop off until somewhere beyond the hundred-meter mark.

It must have been a huge letdown for Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil, who had proudly brandished their weapons, as well as Sylphy, who had smoothly unsheathed her Pale Moon. Jagheera promptly discarded her crossbow obsession to fixate on the new hotness.

We walked for about another couple of hours, stopped so I could put down another marker along the way, then continued the trek until we reached a small

hill.

“Hmm, this is a pretty good distance away. Seems like a nice spot, doesn’t it?” Sylphy said.

“You speak true. I believe this hill would make a sound place for a fortress,” Sir Leonard replied.

I had to agree. We were in the middle of the badlands with hardly any obstacles, and the elevated position would give us a better idea of the lay of the land as well as make it more defensible than anywhere else nearby.

“Very well, then we shall rest here. Kousuke, start building afterward. We’ll keep watch and do some investigating in the meantime,” Sylphy commanded.

“Aye aye, ma’am.” I took out tables and chairs and started getting food ready.

Jagheera blew a whistle, making a shrill noise that could be heard far in the distance. She was calling Pirna back.

First, it was time to fortify myself with a meal. Then it was happy fun base-building time.

“Hmm, this is pretty good. You made this out of minced meat, right? Reminds me of bif. It’s been so long since I last had some,” Sir Leonard mused.

“I like how you can eat it with your hands,” Jagheera said.

“This is quite easy to eat,” Pirna added.

The three of them had their cheeks stuffed with hamburgers. This was the recipe:

Hamburger—Materials: Bread × 1, Vegetable × 1, Tomato × 1, Meat × 1

I could make two hamburgers with that. *Two* of them. Talk about getting bang for your buck. Incidentally, anything would do for the tomato part of the recipe so long as it resembled a tomato, so I substituted a vegetable from this world called a tomel instead. Tomels were pretty much tomatoes, except they kept

that green color even when they were fully ripe. I had no idea what the heck had happened to the lycopene.

And while I had expected the bread to pop out looking like some kind of fancy French loaf, I had actually made soft hamburger buns dusted with sesame seeds. Also, I had used gizma meat, but these were clearly beef patties.

As for vegetables, whether I used oneel (purple onions), dicon (black daikon radishes), or anything else, it popped out as crispy lettuce. Weird, yet so incredible.

My powers might not make any sense, but I can't even complain.

Madame Zamil was silently sinking her teeth into the burger. Either she was prone to bouts of quiet during a meal or she loved the food so much that it had rendered her speechless. Probably the latter—there was a different kind of glint in her eye.

“Two isn’t enough,” Sir Leonard said.

“I want more too!” Jagheera demanded.

Pirna groaned. “I’m full.”

“I request seconds,” Madame Zamil told me.

“Comin’ right up.” I took a wooden plate out of my inventory and piled on the hamburgers. *Eat as much as you’d like, folks.*

“Just make sure you don’t eat so much that you can’t move anymore,” Sylphy said as she reached toward the plate. She was a fan of the burgers too.

Nevertheless, these burgers were pretty big. I was stuffed after two.

Once I’m done eating, the first thing I gotta make is a bathroom. It’s only a matter of time before one of us needs it, and we’re not going anywhere tonight.

It went without saying that a flush toilet would be out of the question, so it’d have to be a pit latrine, unfortunately. *Since we need them for men and women, I’ll make two for each and place them a little ways apart.*

“Hmm, no, wait, I should make them where we’re going to be sleeping tonight.”

Using one-cubic-meter brick blocks, I plunked down the floor, walls, and roof. The walls were mighty thick, but we'd want them to stand up against gizmas and the Holy Kingdom's troops garrisoned in the Kingdom of Merinard. Plus, during my tests yesterday, I'd discovered that blocks that were half as thick had their durability reduced by half too. Time and time again, the world found ways to remind me how important it was to be empirical about my whole situation.

"Done already?"

"Just with the building. I still have to work on the interior."

However, we were only going to be using this place to sleep for tonight, so I had only made a big room for sleeping and a room for dining. I placed hammock stands in the bedroom. They were surprisingly comfortable, but you'd get cold if you didn't make sure to wrap yourself up in a blanket.

"Now for the protective walls."

We'd decided that this fortress—which would be our first Omitt base—needed to be big enough to house all three hundred of the refugees. This was because as the base closest to the Black Forest, it could potentially become the last line of defense against an invasion.

Plus, being close to the Black Forest meant that it would be easy to get backup from the elves. Once we liberated the Kingdom of Merinard and moved our headquarters elsewhere, we would hand this fortress over to the elves. In exchange, we had their complete support.

I'd discussed the dimensions and design of the fortress at length with Danan, Sir Leonard, and Madame Zamil for their military insight, and I'd also sought the logical input of Melty and Ira. We'd come to the collective conclusion that the fortress would be a hundred meters square, with walls seven meters high and three meters thick.

Also, I was to make the corners diamond-shaped to create something like a bastion. That way, we could attack the enemy from the flanks if they tried to attack our gates. It only made sense; we had a huge advantage at long range thanks to the crossbows, and we meant to exploit them to the bitter end. It would also be an effective design for the elves, given their tactical focus on archery.

I placed wooden frame blocks to determine the general shape. They were kind of unique blocks in that I could put them back into my inventory without destroying them first. They didn't take many materials to make and were quite handy to use as references when building.

The outline took me about half an hour. Pirna checked its shape from the skies and then conferred with Sir Leonard, Sylphy, and the others about it. It seemed to be okay, so I started constructing the actual fortress.

First, I dug five meters down. The foundation was key when constructing castle walls. Without an underground foundation, they could easily invade by digging underneath the walls.

"His speed is just incredible," Jagheera remarked as she watched me dig.

"I don't think that would be possible even with earth magic," Sir Leonard said.

Part of me wanted to tell them to help out, but there was no way they could match my speed. They'd probably only get in my way.

Once I was done, I started placing the brick blocks.

I'm used to placing blocks now, but it's annoying to put them down one at a time. Is there no way to set down a ton at once? The moment this thought ran through my mind, I was suddenly able to set down a three-by-three-block chunk of 27 blocks. *What the...? Did I unlock some kind of achievement or something?*

Beginner Builder—Place approximately 5,000 building blocks.

****Unlocks the Mass Placement feature. Unlocks Mirror Mode.***

"Oh... Well, why couldn't you have unlocked sooner?"

Mirror Mode placed a center line as the focal point on a spot; when I placed blocks, it would place blocks on the opposite side, equidistant from the center line. With this, building would be even faster than before, at about half the effort.

However, that was just for bilateral symmetry, so I couldn't do anything with

the blocks I had placed. I either had to destroy the ones already there or start placing blocks using that mode starting now, and then laboriously fill in the places that didn't have any blocks placed on the opposite side later. I decided on the latter.

"Kousuke, there's a wall coming together on that side too," Sylphy told me.

"I just got a new ability. It'll make building much faster!"

"I see." My mistress had this vacant look in her eyes as she resolved to accept her reality without question. She had known me the longest, so it was no surprise.

As for me, I'd already made peace with my preposterous gift and all the conveniences it afforded me. Besides, thinking about the illogical dark power that fed my crafting abilities would just drive someone to madness.

I carried on building the rampart using Mirror Mode and Mass Placement.

"I was wondering if you'd be able to finish it today, but this is crazy," Sylphy said.

"I actually managed to pull it off, didn't I?" I imagined that it still required some minor adjustments, but I had finished building walls to the exact specifications we needed.

"Next, we need everyone to inspect the walls. Report back if you find anything. Kousuke, keep outfitting this place," Sylphy ordered.

"Aye aye, ma'am."

I watched everyone scatter to do their inspections. Meanwhile, I started making stairs, a storehouse for supplies, and lodgings for us.

When I'm done with this, I'll dig a well next. Shelter won't mean much if we've got no water. Which reminds me: I need to dig out underground as well. I want to make an escape route just in case we need to evacuate the fortress. Shame that digging underground sucks big time.

At one point, I'd contemplated digging a safe underground passage straight to the Kingdom of Merinard so that we wouldn't have to travel aboveground. I'd tried it yesterday, since I needed to fortify the elves' village's bulwark anyway.

The short version of this story is that I nearly killed myself.

The digging worked okay—I made progress at a pretty fast clip—but I knew I’d dug too greedily and too deeply when I hit water. The air got thin and hard to breathe, and the soil crumbled like some kind of cave-in. I was almost buried alive.

It seemed that when I shoveled, my crazy powers were applied to the upper side of the shovel, or rather, only the side of the shovel that carried the dirt—and the tip. It had no effect on the bottom, so no matter how much I dug, dirt was still dirt.

With a little experimenting, I discovered that it dug up stone, gravel, and soil by ignoring their hardness. Meaning I had to take different measures for the cave-ins and air. I was able to prevent the cave-ins by placing building blocks. The type didn’t matter. For air, I either had to make huge bellows or use wind magic, wind spirit magic, or wind spirit gems. I could also try making an appropriate number of air vents, since that seemed to work. I’d be okay as long as I had Sylphy with me, milling out fresh air with that wind gem in her bracelet.

The tunnel strategy was a valid option, but it was too draining—well, honestly, too dangerous—for me to put up with right then, and it was going to take more prep time than I wanted to spend.

I decided to only build the lodgings and storehouse for now and not worry about their interiors yet, since we wouldn’t be using them right away.

“Kousuke, the sun’s about to set. Let’s call it a day,” Sylphy told me.

“Mmkay.”

I was just about halfway done placing the buildings. I only had the lodgings to work on next. Apparently, my walls were flawless. It had been worth it to work up a nice coating of sweat and grime.

“C’mon, Kousuke. Take off your clothes. I’ll wash you.”

“Okay. Can you please warm it up a li—ahhhh! That’s cold!”

“Aha ha ha. Sorry about that.” She laughed, but I knew she must have done that on purpose. Still, I was grateful for her using spirit magic to make water, so

I let it slide.

Sir Leonard chuckled as he scanned my naked body. “Ha ha ha. Kousuke should work out a bit more.”

“Yeah, he’s lacking muscle,” Jagheera agreed.

“You think so? I’d say he’s got just the right physique,” Pirna said.

“His frame’s not bad. He could be quite impressive if he trained,” Madame Zamil commented.

Apparently, Jagheera and Pirna didn’t see eye to eye about the aesthetic value of macho dudes. Madame Zamil sounded like she was evaluating me as an instructor rather than as a woman.

You might wonder if I felt embarrassed. I was no blushing virgin, so I thought nothing of being in the nude. Not that I’d be comfortable becoming a nudist or anything like that, but after being caked in mud from laboring so long, I just didn’t have it in me to care. If they didn’t like it, they could just look away. Ha ha ha.

Once all of the mud was off of me, Sylphy conjured a breeze to dry my hair and skin. It was perfect.

“Do you guys want a shower too?” she asked the group.

“I’m fine waiting until tomorrow morning,” Sir Leonard said.

Jagheera nodded. “I’d like one before bed.”

“Me too,” Pirna chirped.

“And I as well,” Madame Zamil said.

So the girls all planned to get washed before they went to sleep. I wasn’t gonna peek, okay? I got to see Sylphy naked every night, after all; I had a feeling that Jagheera and Zamil would punch me anyway, and more importantly, I was sure that I’d piss Sylphy off. It was just too scary to consider.

I decided to have dinner and head straight to bed. I could hear the ladies yelling about something, but it sounded like they were having fun. For my part, I had a feeling that if I didn’t hit the sack immediately, Sir Leonard would start

badgering me to make him a fresh set of mithril weapons.

I'm going to bed. Goodnight! I'm gonna sleep! No, get your hand off my shoulder, Sir Leonard! Lemme go!

"I'm Sylphy's slave. I can't make weapons out of a material as valuable as mithril ore without her permission. Ask her first if you want them so bad," I blurted, and then I fled.

Even the self-serving Leonard couldn't force me to do it after hearing that, so he withdrew.

"Princess, I beg of you! Please grant unto me mithril swords as well."

Nah, he just went to Sylphy instead. In all my years, I would have never predicted that he would go and shamelessly appeal to her, like old man Rihaku from *Fist of the North Star*... Just kidding. I had a teeny, tiny hunch this might happen.

"Now, Sir Leonard, it's not nice to go behind everyone's back. Your Highness, I would like one as well," Madame Zamil said.

"Eek..."

Sylphy was looking at me with a frightening expression. I frantically tried to convey through gestures that she'd vowed to protect me, but I had no idea whether she understood me.

She closed her eyes for a time, then opened them with a sigh of resignation. She turned to Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil and said, "I acknowledge your efforts and your public service. However, mithril weapons are an entirely different matter. I cannot readily agree to handing them out. You know why, don't you? You've seen Pale Moon with your own eyes, so I'm sure you understand, but the mithril weapons that Kousuke can forge are of an immeasurable quality even among treasured swords. If we do not treat them with due respect, it could lead to the downfall of a noble's territory—or even the destruction of an entire nation."

Sylphy's declaration left them at a loss for words. I was pretty surprised

myself.

Huh? I know they had said Pale Moon was on a “national treasure” level of quality, but they’re considered that good? Have I become a crafter who brings about the downfall of nations? Like, what?

“In other words, if I am the one who shall determine who gets bestowed mithril swords and spears, then the standards for who can receive them shall be quite strict. You’ll have to eliminate an enemy general or slay a catastrophe-level monster.”

Huh? That doesn’t sound too good.

“However, Kousuke does not come from our world. He is not bound by our values. Creating a mithril weapon takes only a little bit more time than a regular weapon for him. I’m sure he would be willing to make one if you deepen your relations with him or pay him something equal to the value of the effort involved. While Kousuke is technically my slave, that is merely a code to show what our personal relationship is. The slave collar has no effect on him, after all.”

Uh, Miss Sylphy?

“So, what you’re saying is...” said Sir Leonard.

“You aren’t going to restrict Kousuke’s actions in any particular way?”
Madame Zamil said.

“Pretty much,” Sylphy murmured as she looked out into the distance.

Sir Leonard’s and Madame Zamil’s heads snapped in my direction. I dashed away at top speed.

“Huh?! He’s surprisingly fast!” Sir Leonard exclaimed.

“What a strange way of running!” Madame Zamil said.

I used all of the abilities at my disposal to run around the fortress. I dashed as fast as I could, imagining myself holding the Shift key, reaching a speed that exceeded human comprehension while I casually used the command jumps and my own jumps to scale the building.

However, they were formidable opponents. Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil

hadn't earned their reputations for nothing. They were slowly but steadily gaining on me. They eventually had me trapped in the middle of the square atop of a wooden tower ten blocks high.

"Kousuke, come down. There's no need to fear us."

"That's right."

Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil tried to coax me into surrendering. I hissed at them, but they had me. *Now what should I do? Think. Think, me!*

"You seem to be in some trouble, Kousuke." As I was trying to come up with an escape plan, Pirna came flying over. Was I saved?! "I'm your ally here. I can rescue you!"

"That would be great! But how?"

"As long as it's not too far, I can grab you and fly away! We should be able to make it to the walls!"

"Okay, sure, then I'll just..."

"But, hmm, I am feeling a bit tired. Perhaps I'd feel more up to it if you'd come up with a new kind of weapon for us harpies to use."

"Just when we thought he had an ally, it turned out to be another predator," Sir Leonard said.

"Pirna! Grab Kousuke and bring him down here!" Madame Zamil commanded.

"It'll be impossible for him to shake us off with your speed. I am sure we can work together."

"Hee hee. That's a good point. Whatever shall we do?" Pirna grinned, flashing her pearly whites.

Is it really me versus the world?!

"How long are you guys gonna keep messing around? C'mon, I want breakfast." Jagheera yawned as she delicately polished her bolt-action rifle with a cloth. Sylphy was sitting right next to her, taking care of her blade.

Meanwhile, Sir Leonard, Madame Zamil, and Pirna had me cornered. The

haves and have-nots—this was a microcosm of society.

“Haven’t you all had enough fun? Kousuke, you come back now too,” Sylphy said as she finished with Pale Moon.

“I almost had him too,” Pirna grumbled as she trudged back over to Sylphy.

Sir Leonard followed suit. “So close.”

“How exasperating,” I heard Madame Zamil say as she followed.

Puzzled, I destroyed the wood blocks at my feet and descended back to the ground.

I made my way over to Sylphy, noticing her grim expression. “So, Kousuke. That really sucked, didn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess so.”

The two, or rather the three of them, had seemed pretty zealous when they chased me, but there was something playful about it as well. It had taken a lot out of me, but I wasn’t afraid for my life, and it had been kind of fun. Thinking of it in a more childish way, it was like we’d played a game of tag.

“I’m sure that there’ll be even more people like them who’ll try approaching you for your powers and what you can make with them. However, I am trying to make sure that you’re always surrounded by me, Danan, Sir Leonard, and other such powerful and influential people so that—and I hate to use this term—ordinary people don’t try to directly appeal to you.”

She must have been referring to those who didn’t hold any special positions—the ordinary refugees who weren’t particularly skilled in combat or had no other special ability.

“I swore that I would protect you. And I will do what I can to keep people from preying on you. Make sure you always have someone like Danan, Sir Leonard, or Madame Zamil nearby whenever I’m not around.”

“But those guards are the same people who want to hound me for mithril weapons.”

“I’m sorry, but you should probably comply with their wishes. In return, I’m sure they’ll protect you with their lives.”

I glanced over to see that Sir Leonard was broadly grinning at me with his lion face. His sharp fangs sent a shiver down my spine. Madame Zamil's expression was tranquil, but I could see a sparkle in her eyes.

Oh, I get it. These two well-renowned people are going to be my exclusive bodyguards.

Actually, I didn't mind making weapons for them all that much. I'd acquired more mithril ore the day before yesterday, and if I made some more workbenches, I could create the weapons right away. With just *one* more workbench, I could make two or three weapons in a day if I just set them to craft.

"In that case, maybe I will make them for you," I said.

Sir Leonard's face glowed with satisfaction. "I see you are a discerning man, Kousuke."

"Much appreciated," Madame Zamil said with a similar expression.

By contrast, Pirna looked disappointed. *I understand how you feel. Really, I do.*

"Look, I've already developed a new weapon that harpies can use," I said as I took it out of my inventory. Everyone looked at it with their heads tilted in puzzlement.

"A club?" Sir Leonard said.

"It's a club," Madame Zamil confirmed.

"I don't think I can use this," Pirna told me.

"It's not a club, okay?" I chuckled awkwardly as I picked it up. It certainly looked like a club—or even a potato masher. Maybe some of you readers have already figured it out, but it was something called a stick grenade. "I think it'll be faster to show you how it works rather than explain, so go wait on the wall. I'm going to go put a target outside."

"It must be a weapon for attacking faraway enemies," Pirna mused.

"Indeed," Madame Zamil said.

Sir Leonard turned to me. "I shall accompany you as your escort."

Outside, I set down groups of logs to use as targets, and we ascended the wall.

"This is called a hand grenade or a throwing grenade. You throw it near your target, and then it explodes and causes damage. Lemme explain how to use it," I said.

First, you took off the safety cap on the end of the handle. A weighted string came out from the hollow of the handle, which you were supposed to wrap around your finger as you squeezed the weight along with the handle. Then it was ready to throw.

"After you pull out the string, you've got three or four seconds before this part at the end violently explodes. You won't be able to stop the explosion, so you have to be really careful. Brace yourself, because the sound it makes is really loud." I threw the stick grenade at the targets. I pulled out the string as I released it from my hand, which ignited the fuse of the bomb inside with frictional heat, like a match.

The stick grenade struck one of the logs and detonated. Most of the logs were blown to smithereens with a thunderous boom that resonated all the way to your stomach.

These were also used by Short-stache's nation, but I wasn't particularly a fan of their weapons. I was more into the ones from the land of hamburgers. I only knew as much as I did about these because I'd fallen down a bit of an internet research hole once. I was curious, since guns and other handmade explosives turned up every once in a while in survival games. That wasn't a thing? Ah, but it was.

As for why I picked stick grenades, they were easy to handle and operate, and they would fit nearly in a harpy's talons. Perhaps there was something more suitable for folks like Pirna out there, but this was the only thing I could come up with. I didn't have oil or anything like that for making a Molotov cocktail. If I ever had an abundant supply of liquid fuel, I wanted to try making a flamethrower or something like that, though.

So yeah, I had been thinking about making bombs that were optimized for

harpies. If they could carry something a bit heavier, then I'd be interested in adding more gunpowder and making something like a harpy aviation bomb that they could use to scatter shrapnel far and wide.

While I was busy reflecting, everyone finally recovered from the shock of what they'd witnessed.

"Kousuke, whatever that was... That was incredible," Sylphy said, her voice notably calm.

"That resembled the explosive magic of a high-ranking mage," Sir Leonard said coolly.

"Imagine it in the hands of every rank-and-file soldier," Madame Zamil added.

"Huh? The harpies are gonna drop these from the skies? Seriously?" Jagheera's tone was flat too.

"Wow! I wanna try it too!" Meanwhile, Pirna was incredibly excited. Pirna's request was much appreciated, since I wanted a harpy to test it out in the first place.

"Just to warn you, this is an incredibly dangerous weapon. If you screw up, it's instant death for you and everyone around you. Be very, very careful," I said with a serious look on my face.

"I shall." Pirna straightened her posture and nodded with a meek look on her face. I handed over the bombs.

"First, grip the handle with your foot."

"Okay. It feels weird to have you messing with my foot like this."

Pirna had sharp talons like a bird of prey, so they looked surprisingly burly. After confirming she had a grip on the handle, I took off the safety cap and then tied the string with the weight to her ankle. I wrapped it around both of her feet.

"How's the weight?"

"Light as a feather. I could manage a lot more weight."

"I see. Is the handle comfortable enough to hold on to?"

“It’s a little small, but that’s okay.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Do *not* let it go until you’re ready to drop it. It’ll explode once the string is pulled out.”

“I understand. Okay, I’m gonna go give it a try now.”

Pirna kicked up strong gusts of wind as she flew high into the sky. It seemed like she *was* using some kind of magic to help her fly. I doubted those feathers alone could create such winds.



From her position high in the air, Pirna dropped one of the bombs onto the logs. It landed a little ways away from the targets and exploded. Nevertheless, some of the logs were blown to bits.

Then she dropped it from an even higher altitude, comfortably out of arrow range. The bomb hit terminal velocity pretty fast, given the longer fall and the strength she put behind the toss, landing where several logs stood. Another explosion, and the logs were goners.

Hmm. This felt much more villainous than I'd expected. But according to Pirna, she could carry bombs that would be heavier and even more powerful. I'd have to try making some dummy bombs to test handles and weights in different sizes.

"I did it!" Pirna chirped with a joyful smile as she returned.

"That was incredible," Sir Leonard said.

"From that altitude and with that power... The battlefield will never be the same," Madame Zamil said.

"Cool. I'm hungry." Jagheera was doubled over.

Sylphy was standing with her arms crossed, lost in thought about something. I had no idea what might be going through her mind right now, but it was time for breakfast.

And then it'll be back to work after. Oh, but I have to craft those mithril weapons and dig a well... Dang! I have a ton on my to-do list!

After breakfast, I got back to crafting and building. First, I was working on building the lodgings, and then I would work on the well. However...

"Jagheera, Pirna, there's something I'd like you to do for me."

"What is it?" Jagheera asked.

"Yes?"

Jagheera had recovered her energy again now that she had eaten. Speaking of which, we had had bread, soup, salad, and steak, all of which I had crafted

ahead of time. It might sound like a heavy breakfast, but our party was mainly composed of manual laborers, so we scarfed it all down. Everyone but Pirna and me even had seconds.

Anyway, I started dumping out bullet clips for guns in front of Jagheera. There was a total of 500 bullets.

“I don’t care if the guns break, but I want you to fire these. I’m looking to test their durability.”

“For real?”

“For realsies. It’ll be dangerous, though. The barrel heats up from successive shots. It reduces the accuracy and might even cause the gun to discharge accidentally. If that happens, it will break the shooting and loading mechanisms, not just the barrel. It’s hazardous, but could you give it a try for me?”

“Leave it to me,” Jagheera replied.

I put a big basket on top of the table. Jagheera packed a ton of ammo into it and headed to the top of the walls. That took care of one thing.

“Pirna, I’d like you to do some tests for the weight of the hand grenades. I want you to figure out exactly how much weight you can fly with. And I don’t mean how much you can barely handle; picture yourself traveling from ally encampments to drop bombs on enemy lines multiple times. If the bombs are too heavy, then you won’t be able to make multiple trips. If things go bad, you might even crash right in the middle of enemy lines. It’d be best to figure out a good weight that won’t put too much of a strain on you.”

“That makes sense. Very well, then.”

“I’m going to put out a bunch of tools, wood, iron, and stones, so I want someone to help you out. Also, take these.” I took out four dummy stick grenades from my inventory. “These are dummy grenades without any gunpowder in them. Use them for reference.”

“Okay!”

“I shall lend her my aid,” Madame Zamil offered. I knew Pirna would be in good hands.

“Sylphy, Sir Leonard, I’d like you to be my guards,” I said.

“Okay.”

“Understood.”

Everyone set about the various tasks I’d assigned them. Now it was time for me to work on our lodgings.

“I’m going to start working on the living quarters. In the meantime, Sir Leonard, think about what kind of mithril weapon you want.”

“Yes, sir! You can count on me!”

“Kousuke.”

“Hmm?” I turned back to look at Sylphy and found her face tightened in a somber expression. Was something wrong? “What’s the matter?”

She hesitated a moment before saying, “Never mind. Do your best with the construction.”

“Uh, okay? Yeah. I got this.”

What’s gotten into her? I haven’t a clue what it might be, but I’m gonna give this project my all. Granted, I’m just planning to make a bunch of basic square houses. I already know the size and shape, so this is gonna be easy-peasy.

Thus, I made one house after another; they were really only suitable for holding a few necessities and for sleeping. The houses had four rooms, each big enough for two people to sleep in, and there was a living room as well. I made them two stories, with the same floorplan on the second floor too. I estimated that each building could house sixteen people. By making twenty of these, we could put up over 300 people, at least temporarily.

I was hoping everyone would ignore how livable these places were—or weren’t—although I did put windows in each room, at least. Even gave them sliding wooden storm shutters. The day before yesterday, Melty, Cui, and Ira had supervised as we discussed the dimensions and layouts. I had already crafted the exact number of storm shutters we needed, so all I had to do was mount them.

“It’s incredible watching a building pop up at such incredible speed,” Sylphy

said.

“Quite. Kousuke’s power really is something else,” Sir Leonard agreed.

Ha ha ha, don’t expect any special treatment from me with those honeyed words.

The three of us inspected the final house, and the task was complete. Next up, digging a well.

“Sylphy, I’ll need your help with this.”

“I got it.”

We dug directly underneath as fast as we could to make the well. I didn’t have to worry about air, since Sylphy used her wind magic to send it in after me. I put cobblestone wall blocks along the sides so that the walls didn’t cave in on me. Not only could they be made from just stone and clay, but they were reasonably sturdy, so they were pretty convenient to use.

After I had dug about seven meters deep, I hit water. I dug another meter down, making it eight meters deep. We would be able to use a hand pump at this depth. I had read on the internet once that they only worked until about ten meters down.

Speaking of which, I had already made a hand pump. Everyone had been overjoyed when I’d crafted it and installed it on a well in the refugees’ living area. Like, super-duper happy. They made me promise that I’d install them on every well in the refugee camp. Ira took one for research. I heard that she had assembled a team of skilled underlings from among the refugees to help conduct her studies. She’d said that the construction was surprisingly simple.

Anyway, all I had to do was get back up, since I dug a place where there was a decent amount of water. I took a ten-meter wooden ladder out of my inventory, leaned it against the stone walls, and made my escape.

“Welcome back,” Sir Leonard said.

“Did you find water?” Sylphy asked.

“Yep. I had to dig deeper than I did in the forest, though.”

“I see. We’ll check tomorrow whether it’s potable, then.”

“Spirit magic sure is amazing.” Apparently, Sylphy could figure out if water was drinkable or not by using water spirit magic. Apparently, we couldn’t test the water until after some had gathered in the well and become clear.

“We said that we were going to dig four wells, correct?” Sir Leonard said.

“Yeah, that’s right. Let’s head over to the next spot.”

My digging was accompanied by the sounds of intermittent gunfire. Jagheera was still firing at a good rhythm, at least for now.

I repeated the same process and dug three more wells. I managed to hit water in all of them, so we wouldn’t have to worry about that for some time.

“Why doesn’t anything grow here if there’s water below the surface?” I asked Sylphy.

“They say that nothing can grow here now because the spirit gem weaponry used here unbalanced the power of the local earth elementals.”

“Who said that? Wait, let me guess—the elders?”

“Yup.”

Whoa, the spirit gems certainly were powerful! Could they have a negative influence on the human body or something? Now I was kinda scared of them.

In the castle north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily toiling away, the stout, clearly high-class clergyman in white-and-gold vestments was once again receiving a report. This time, it came from an officer of the imperial court.

“Are things proceeding as planned?” The man’s voice echoed across the spacious dining hall. Before him was a luxurious meal of a thick pork chop, freshly baked and pillowy soft white bread, red wine, a golden-colored soup, fresh fruits, and a vast array of side dishes. He was just in the middle of cutting his chop.

“Yes, Your Excellency. However, we received food from the nearby villages when we defeated the gizmas the other day, so we were unable to gather much.”

“Hmm... I’d say commandeer it, but it would be a bad idea to exploit them to the point that they starve.”

Even humans succumbed to the temptations of rebellion and larceny when pressed to the point of starvation. How would demi-humans, who were lower than humans, react? Well, he didn’t have to think about it.

We are the ones who guide the lowly demi-humans, and they serve us. Sometimes, a certain amount of discretion is required to remind them of that fact.

“Very well. Move food and supplies from the homeland as well. But do so in a way that they do not notice. However, restrict the rations the demi-human slaves receive at the mines as much as possible.”

I’ve been preparing this strategy for years now. I’ll be undone if the pigheaded people in charge of our country try to butt in.

He popped a piece of the pork chop into his mouth. He relished the sweetness of the fat, the mild saltiness, and the pungent flavor of the pepper. After thoroughly savoring the bite, he swallowed and appeased his thirst with some wine.

“Are you certain, Your Excellency?”

“Absolutely. At any rate, I plan to use the rebels until they’re no longer useful. They’re more good to us working off their debt to society than feeding the worms.”

The rotund man—the archbishop—chortled as he thrust his empty wine glass toward a maid, who filled it immediately. Amid the sound of blood-red wine being poured into the glass, no one heard the tiny splash of a water droplet.

Chapter 2:

Let's Start Farming!

NOW THAT THE WELLS were done, it was time to outfit the whole fortress. For toilets, I didn't just make holes in the ground—I made genuine pit latrines. A while back, I'd stumbled into a pretty well-versed latrine digger around town in the refugee camp, and I grilled her about the ins and outs of the job.

The capital of Merinard and other big cities had water and sewage services about as good as I was used to back home, thanks to some magical business that went over my head. They even had flush toilets, but once you got outside the really big urban centers, you were pretty much stuck with doin' your business over a hole—my new acquaintance was pretty damn good at making that as bearable a necessity as possible.

That was fine by me. I'd need good toilets if I wanted to make gunpowder, so I'd listened real closely to what she had to say. Ever since I'd shadowed her as she broke down the process step by step, my own toilets had been flawless.

"Do you have some particular emotional attachment to toilets?" Sir Leonard asked me.

"Not really, but it's important to be hygienic, y'know? It's easy to get sick in unsanitary conditions."

"This is true."

Dozens—no, hundreds—of people would be living in this fortress. We had to be very careful about sanitation, or else we'd all end up catching some sort of plague and turning the whole scene into something straight out of a horror game. The last thing I wanted to do was actually live out one of those *Resident Evil* theme park attractions.

"An epidemic is frightening to imagine." With that, Sir Leonard appeared to understand why I was so particular about the toilets.

To be fair, I had yet to consider *really* using our waste products in earnest as a

strategic resource. History shows again and again that all the really effective mass killers weren't afraid to wade into the biological warfare stuff. I once read that people used to drop human waste together with boiling water or hot oil as a defensive measure during castle sieges in the past, and the English longbowmen at the Battle of Crécy gave their swords and arrowheads a good latrine dunk beforehand—not uncommon practice at the time. The very thought made me shudder.

We'd need enough latrines to accommodate three hundred people—a daunting thing to visualize. And when I considered the demographics, I realized that the ratio of women's to men's toilets was going to have to skew overwhelmingly in the ladies' favor. But that was just how it had to be.

I finished with the toilets, so next up was making some farmland. To kickstart things, I'd brought along some blocks of good farming soil I'd gathered and refined from the Black Forest.

At any rate, I had managed to craft a little something to help out with the job. I was no longer surprised by what I could come up with, even if my powers still made Ira's eye glaze over. I mean, I was just doing what you do with the abilities you have in survival games, y'know? I didn't think it was all that unusual to be able to plant seeds and then have crops ready to harvest three days later.

And so I started digging in the spot where we planned to make a field and put down those first farmland blocks.

"This is quite fertile soil."

"It comes as no surprise that the soil from the Black Forest combined with my powers comes out looking awesome."

Next, I tilled the farmland blocks with a hoe. I had to make rows meant for planting, after all. One, two. One, two!

"Now I understand why Your Highness and Ira look greatly perplexed at times," Sir Leonard said.

"Oh, *now* you get it?" Sylphy responded.

"Tilling the soil is fuuun!" I said.

One swing of my hoe tilled a fair bit of each square meter of soil, and I was able to make some good-looking ridges. I used command actions to slide backward along the farmland blocks as I tilled one after the other. Make a ridge. Till. Make a ridge. Till. It scratched a weird little itch in my hindbrain.

Next came planting the seeds. I'd brought some grain—not the usual corn-adjacent stuff that Melty always had me milling, but more like wheat.

“Even I feel a headache coming on,” Sir Leonard told Sylphy.

“Uh-huh. You see?”

“Planting seeds is so much fuuun!”

With the bag of seeds in hand, I imagined myself right-clicking, and the seed was planted in an instant in the tilled soil. It immediately sprouted with a green bud. Seed. Sprout. Seed. Sprout. It was delightful.

“Heeey, I’ve shot all the bullets... Huh? A field? Why’s this here?” Jagheera stared in wonder at the field in progress, the bolt-action rifle slung over her shoulder.

“Your Highness, the seeds are already sprouting.”

“Yeah, because Kousuke did it.”

Crap, I need to water them. I made a watering can already, so...I guess I’ll use the water from the well. Even if it’s not safe for drinking, it should be good enough for the field.

Breaking into a run, I used the command action to dash to the well. I threw a few bottles of drinking water into the hand pump to prime it and then got to pumping. As I watched the water flow out, I thought, *Ooh? The water looks clear? Well, no need to sweat the small things. Time to water these crops!*

I took several trips between the well and the field, filling my trusty watering can each time, until I had finished watering all of the wheat. *Hmm, this has some room for improvement. I need to make a well for the field or maybe a tank for rainwater. Wait, hold up... I can make blocks float in the air, so maybe I can pull that special maneuver? Nah, I doubt it... But I guess it’s worth a try?*

The question here is what water source to use. Crap, maybe I should’ve drawn

some water from the river? Well water might not work as a substitute. I'll give it a try anyway; what could possibly go wrong?

I dug a hole next to the field—four meters square and two meters deep.

“What are you doing?” Sylphy asked.

“Just a little experiment.”

I put cobblestone wall blocks on the bottom and along the edges. Now it was a hole two meters square and one deep. I poured a bucket of water into the hole at a diagonal.

“Kousuke?”

“Yeah?”

“How come this hole filled all the way up with just two bucketfuls of water?”

“Ha ha ha. Good question,” I said as I filled an empty bucket with water and put that into my inventory.

“Also, you keep filling empty buckets with water, yet it doesn't look like there's any less water in there.”

“Maybe you're just imagining it? I'm sure it's just an optical illusion or something.”

“Uh, I'm not so sure about that.”

“Sylphy, this is a well. A well that's a little bit unusual. Okay?”

“O-okay.” She seemed to sense something from my peremptory attitude about the whole thing and just nodded. Good girl.

Of course, I couldn't tell her that I had created an infinite water source, so I just left it at that.

I'd made it on a whim, but the existence of this kind of thing seemed exceptionally dangerous. A source of water that never ran out no matter how much water you took from it was abominable. Ira's eye was sure to go blank again.

Which reminded me—the flames on the torches I could make never went out either. When I placed them somewhere, they were a source of infinite light, yet

for some reason they gave off no heat. However, when I still held them in my hand, they could burn things... It was strange.

“Oh, yeah. Jagheera, how’s the rifle doing?”

“I shot all five hundred bullets and had no trouble at all. I don’t think the accuracy took much of a hit either.”

“Really? Okay, then, let’s get you switched out.”

“Okay.”

I took the used bolt-action rifle from her and gave her a fresh one I had in reserve. As I checked hers over, I thought, *Next time, I’ll try making one with a 4X magnification scope. I can’t believe she didn’t have any problems with the gun, even after five hundred shots... I’m not sure if it’s because the gun itself is outstanding or because I crafted it. For now, I’m relieved to know the guns won’t suddenly stop working in battle. Although it was too small of a sample to say for sure.*

Just then, Pirna and Madame Zamil showed up. They were astonished at the sight of the field. *It’s a nice field, right?*

“How did this field get here?” Pirna asked.

“The seeds have already sprouted...” Madame Zamil trailed off.

Once the two regained their composure, I asked for a report. Based on that, I figured out the ideal shape and size of the bomb.

“This is pretty heavy, though. Are you sure you’ll be able to carry it?” I asked Pirna.

“Yes, it’ll be fine. If I’m going about ten kilometers each way, I should be able to make multiple round trips.”

“Hmm. Okay, then.”

In order to make the prototype, I’d improved the dummy stick grenade, adding a largish crosspiece to the end of the handle and machining it into a T-shape. *I see, this is easier for her to carry and throw. With the added weight of the metal on the warhead, the whole thing is probably about four times heavier than the average dummy grenade. Fully loaded with all the gunpowder I can*

pack inside, it'll probably weigh six times more. This probably weighs about three kilograms.

"All right, I'll hash out a couple different prototypes. Madame Zamil, I'd like you to come up with the design for your mithril weapon."

"So I shall."

I was done outfitting the fortress for now, so I decided to work on weapons development after lunch. I had Sir Leonard, Madame Zamil, Jagheera, and Pirna patrol the fortress's periphery. Sylphy would stay with me.

"We're off to patrol, then," Sir Leonard said.

"Be careful out there."

We only had gizmas to worry about here for the most part, so I doubted those four would run into any issues. I took my smithing station and workbench out of my inventory and started hammering out sniper scopes and aerial bombs for harpies.

Item creation had become incredibly easy after I took the Creator skill. It would optimize even the vaguest of ideas in my head and make a recipe for me, so it was a snap. However, the items I earned through this function took much longer to craft, and they required more materials than the ones I started with. An understandable drawback, though.

4X Magnification Scope—Materials: Glass × 5, Iron × 1, Mechanical Parts × 4

The material cost for this one isn't too bad, but it takes a long time to craft. Thirty minutes? Well, guess there isn't much to be done about that. I'll make ten of them so that the Mass-Producer skill will come into effect. That'll save me one item's worth of materials. The improved workbench will be busy producing scopes, so I should make another improved workbench. I have the materials, so I can make one right away.

"Next, let's get our harpy friends loaded up."

I thought up the design while looking at the sample that Pirna and Madame Zamil had made for me. *Since this is basically going to be an antipersonnel weapon, there's no need to make it shaped like a shell. I'll make the warhead thick to improve fragmentation and increase the powder load. The fuse can be the same shape, but maybe I should improve the string so it's easier to put on. I'll add a hook to the weight part and make it so all they have to do is wrap it around and hook it to themselves.*

These were the recipes it came up with:

Stick Grenade—Materials: Gunpowder × 2, Iron × 3, Wood × 1, Mechanical Parts × 1

Harpy Aerial Bomb Type 1—Materials: Gunpowder × 6, Iron × 3, Wood × 1, Mechanical Parts × 1

Three times the cost of the stick grenade... I just hope it's three times as effective as well. I'll go ahead and make ten of these for now. And maybe I'll make about thirty stick grenades too.

Just as I had finished queuing those up, I happened to catch sight of Sylphy. She looked like she wanted to say something, her expression troubled and apologetic. *What could be wrong?*

"What's up?"

"Um, are you okay?"

"What do you mean?" I was confused by the vague question. I wasn't feeling particularly stressed. If anything, I was only aware of how alive I felt.

"Didn't you come from a peaceful place? Um, to be honest, I'm kind of scared now. Bolt-action rifles and hand grenades are both really powerful weapons, aren't they? I was wondering if you found it distressing to have to churn out these kinds of weapons one after the other just for my sake."

"Ooh, I see. To tell the truth, I hadn't really been thinking about it all that much."

That really *was* the truth. Perhaps it was irresponsible, but up until this very moment, I'd been having the time of my life making these crazy weapons. I hadn't stopped to contemplate the fact that these were tools for murder to be used against people.

"Now that you mention it, I guess I'm taking a lot on, huh? Humans from the Holy Kingdom are going to die in droves because of the weapons I've made."

They would hate me. Sure, our soldiers would be the ones doing the hands-on killing in the war to come, but I'd have more blood on my hands than I could ever wash away.

"Guess that means I'm bound straight for hell," I said.

"Hell?"

"It's a concept we talk about back home. There's an incredibly scary god there named Yama—or Enma—who judges the dead based on their sins in life and doles out appropriate punishment. Obviously, we have no clue whether that god truly exists." I shrugged, smiling.

I'm not so sure about that now, though; I've begun to believe in the supernatural. Maybe hell really does exist.

"I see. So you believe in a world after death. Here, we believe that our souls become stars when we die."

"How romantic."

We had some stories of people who became stars after they died back in my world too. Like Orion.

"But if that's where you're headed after death, then I'm probably going to be right there with you. I'm the one who's making you create these weapons, after all."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? I'd prefer to go there alone. I don't want you to have to go there with me."

"No matter the gravity of our sins, if we share the guilt, then that means the weight of it is halved, right? I won't allow you to be the only one made to suffer."

“You’re such a kind mistress. I’ll do my best to do many good things as well, so that Yama’s sentence won’t be so severe.”

“Yeah. We need to focus on saving people too—not just killing them.” Sylphy smiled. She always had the most adorable smile.

I was setting myself up to take on more deaths than I could really reckon with. But I’d go out of my way to save lots of people too. I wanted Sylphy to keep smiling.

Sylphy was right—we had to consider saving people, not just killing them. Her—our—goal was to reclaim the Kingdom of Merinard, not slaughter every single human from the Holy Kingdom. Killing was a means to an end, but it was not our goal. I’d gotten my priorities mixed up somewhere along the line.

“Still, killing them would be simpler than letting them live.”

“That does seem kinda obvious.” Sylphy’s smile contained no trace of humor.

At the end of the day, what we wanted was the power to reclaim Merinard from the Holy Kingdom. In other words, destruction, slaughter, and violence.

“Either way, we’re going to have to slap the Holy Kingdom right in the face once, maybe even two or three times. We need to convince them Merinard isn’t worth taking. We can consider sparing their lives after we’ve accomplished that.”

“Right. First, we’ve gotta beat them.”

You could walk out flowery ideals and claim that nothing of value can be born of violence, or that a nation with no military invites no invasions. But at the end of the day, if you’ve got something another guy wants badly enough—oil, minerals, fruit, cheap labor, whatever—and they convince themselves they deserve to have it more than you deserve to live, then no appeal to that guy’s conscience is gonna save you.

Mercy was a luxury only afforded to those in a position of absolute victory. It wasn’t in our budget right now.

Thus, I decided to tell Sylphy everything that was on my mind—in short, what

kinds of weapons I was thinking of developing, how they functioned, and how I planned to use them. Everything.

“Basically, I was thinking we could fortify ourselves inside a fortress and launch a defensive battle.”

Sylphy nodded. “That’s a good idea. Our numbers are few. It would be senseless to commence war on an open field. If we use your powers, we can approach enemy lines under the cover of night and have the fortress completely built before first light.”

The chief flaws of any fortress or stronghold are that it takes a serious amount of time to build, and once you build it, you’re stuck with it where it’s at. From the enemy’s point of view, if the fortification isn’t near their own position or a logistical chokepoint, then no matter how well-built and strong the fortification may be, they won’t feel threatened by it at all.

My powers would solve the speed and mobility problem; harpy saturation bombing would provide the threat.

We would build our base near the enemy’s position, and once our defenses were prepared, in would go the harpies. Spells and arrows only reached so far, and a harpy’s flight ceiling sat well outside that distance. The enemy’d be sitting ducks. That alone could be enough to determine our victory.

If the remaining enemies had a lick of sense, they were sure to try to smash our base immediately after. There’d be plenty more vicious beatings waiting for them.

“As they close in on us, they’ll be met with an onslaught of stick grenade bombings and improved crossbow bolts. No reason we can’t keep shelling them, of course. Also, I made this thing.” I brought out an object that looked like a stick grenade and showed it to her. The difference was that the part where the handle went wasn’t hollow; it was a stake. There was another metallic stake with a string dangling from the warhead end. The warhead was bigger, and the shard was bulkier.

“It’s a trap called an antipersonnel landmine. You stick the stake parts into the ground, far enough that the string is pulled tight. When someone’s foot catches and pulls the string, then *boom*. The gunpowder in the warhead explodes, and

tiny metallic shards scatter around the area.”

“Isn’t that...dangerous?” In her wisdom, Sylphy immediately recognized the unspoken knock-on issues.

“Yup, it’s dangerous. We have to make sure we retrieve all the ones we’ve put down after the war is over, or else bad things will happen. Anyone can make these things go off.”

“I think it’d be best if we avoided using them, then.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

Our numbers were few. I figured they might be tempting as a sort of force multiplier. They didn’t take too many materials to craft either.

“I made this too,” I said as I placed a certain kind of building block: a cubic meter of tightly bound red cylinders. The side of it read “TNT.”

“What’s that?”

“An explosive block. I think if you light it on fire, it’ll cause a huge explosion.”

“You think?”

“I only made it. I haven’t actually tried detonating it yet.”

“I see. And what are you going to use such a dangerous object for?”

“I was thinking maybe we could use it as a trap, but I don’t really have any ideas.”

As of yet, I hadn’t found any kind of material in this world that looked like it could be detonated from afar. I’d made a fuse, though, so we could pull the string and blow it up from a distance. But I wanted something that we could explode safely from even farther away. I’d have to discuss this matter with Ira when we went home.

“I wish we had a way detonate it from really far away.”

“It goes off when it’s lit?”

“Yeah, that should detonate it. I think.”

I didn’t really know the properties of real TNT powder, but I knew that

explosive blocks in games went off when you burned them.

“Then perhaps we could use fire arrows, fire magic, or some kind of magic item. Yes, a magic item would surely work. You should ask Ira.”

“Will do. By the way, if we do come up with a surefire way to blow these up from a distance, then we could let the enemy take the fortress on purpose and blow the whole thing right to hell.”

For a moment, Sylphy was speechless. Then she said, “You have some surprisingly dirty ideas in that head of yours.”

“Nah, hardly.”

We could also dig a tunnel directly under the fortress or the walls around the enemy base’s and blow them up that way too. This kind of gleeful demolition is just a man’s adventurous spirit at work.

“Those are all of the ideas I have for now. I’ll let you know if I come up with anything else.”

“Hmm. Are you not going to improve the bolt-action rifles any?” Sylphy asked as I was cleaning up the explosive block.

“Improve it?”

“I thought it could be made stronger if you could fire more shots at a faster rate.”

“Ooh, good thinking, Sylphy. We had weapons like that back in my home world. The bolt-action rifles are good for sniping, since you can’t put too many bullets in or fire it rapidly, but weapons like you’re describing that can shoot multiple bullets in succession are more mainstream.”

“Is that so? Why haven’t you made those, then?” Sylphy tilted her head to the side, giving me a puzzled look. She was so cute.

“Because they consume way too much ammo. While guns that can shoot in rapid succession are definitely powerful, we’ll wind up wasting a ton of bullets. I’ll make them as soon as we can afford to take the hit to our ammo supply. Under our current circumstances, it’s just too costly to keep multiple rapid-fire guns loaded. Speaking of which, it’d also be difficult to equip all 300 people with

bolt-action rifles. With the power levels I have going on now, I could only make enough ammo for ten people at most.”

“I see. So in other words, guns are basically high-cost, low-return projects?”

“That’s right. Especially for ammunition. As far as maintenance costs go, there isn’t much of a difference between crossbows and bolt-action rifles, but it’s much cheaper to produce bolts than bullets.” It would be a different story if I managed to stumble upon a motherlode of lead, copper, and saltpeter. “I’ve also been working on guns that aren’t bolt action rifles. Like these.”

I retrieved four guns from my inventory. The first was a revolver. The second was a semi-automatic pistol with an exchangeable magazine. The third was a shotgun with two thick barrels. The final gun was of similar design to the first two guns; it had a thicker barrel, like the shotgun, but there was only one.

“You’ve made a lot of them.”

“This one’s a handgun called a revolver, this handgun’s a semi-automatic pistol, and this one’s a double-barreled shotgun. This last one is the successor of the first two called a pump-action shotgun.”

“Hmm. And how are they different from the bolt-action rifles? It’s kind of easy to tell with these handguns, but can I try holding them?”

“Sure. They’re not loaded right now.”

With my permission, Sylphy picked up the revolver and inspected it closely. *Ooh, a dark-skinned elf packing heat... She looks hot. Especially since she’s always been the aloof beauty type. Me likey.*

“This is heavier than I thought it’d be.”

“Well, it *is* made of iron. Handguns are weapons you use at close range. That one can hold six shots, and this one has eight at most. You fire lead bullets that are about the size of your finger. They’re more than enough to kill a human at close range with a single shot.”

As it turned out, both of these handguns originated from the country of hamburgers. Frankly, I was also a fan of handguns from the country of vodka.

“These are for short-range battles, then?”

“That’s right. The world I came from has long abandoned fights with swords and spears. Nowadays, we usually fight with semi-automatic rifles, and at close range, we use these kinds of handguns or submachine guns that can fire handgun-friendly bullets in rapid succession.”

“But didn’t you say this thing can fire only six times? Isn’t that a problem in the middle of a fight?”

An understandable question coming from the inhabitant of a fantasy world where battles were mainly fought at close range. Swords and spears were usable for as long as they stayed intact.

“We hardly fight at all back in my world. I mean, just think about it. Everyone on both sides has these semi-automatic rifles. If a fight breaks out, you’ll be riddled with holes. There are a lot of times when you can’t use rifles in a sudden encounter or need something for self-defense instead. Also, it’s more the kind of weapon that police—I mean, guards—carry.”

To be fair, there were weirdos who liked using bayonets even in the twenty-first century. The army of the country of fancy black teas sure was strange. (That’s a compliment.)

“I see. And what about these big guns?”

“I know I just said that there’s not much close-range fighting where I’m from, but that’s what these are for. Though, I think they’ll be effective enough within about 50 meters or so.”

“Oh? And how are they different from a rifle?”

“They can shoot all different kinds of shells. Also, they can shoot multiple handgun bullets simultaneously or numerous bullets even smaller than those. They can fire a big shell with one shot too. However, the range decreases the smaller the bullet.”

“Hmm. And how are they used?”

“Street fights, indoor battles, breaking into buildings where enemies are hiding, stuff like that. They’re also commonly used for hunting.”

“Got it. Is that all you have?”

“Nah, I still have some to show you. Wanna see?”

“Yes, I’d like to see them all first.”

“Okay. Shall we head to the top of the wall?”

I put the guns away, and the two of us made our way up the wall. I took a big weapon out of my inventory and put it down. This one was a placeable object.

“That’s a pretty big crossbow,” Sylphy said.

“It’s called a ballista. It shoots massive, spear-like bolts. We draw the bowstring by turning this lever together. Let’s do it.”

“Okay.”

The two of us worked together to turn the lever at the rear of the ballista and drew the bowstring. It took a *lot* of energy.

“It’s done. Now what?”

“This is the bolt it uses.”

“That’s practically a spear.”

“I know.” I set the bolt in, moved the pedestal, and aimed the sight. “We fire it by pulling this lever. Try to aim it somewhere far away and fire.”

“Okay.” Sylphy pointed the ballista at a faraway boulder and then pulled the lever. There was a loud crack as the bowstring released and the bolt zoomed out like a flying spear. It struck the boulder with magnificent precision, piercing deep and smashing it to pieces.

“That’s quite powerful.”

“It can shoot even farther than a crossbow, so you can attack enemies beyond crossbow range. I think we can destroy battering rams and stuff from a distance too. Next up, I’ve got this.”

I stuck the ballista in my inventory and took out an iron cannon, which I put on top of the parapet. It was a gun, but it wasn’t that big. The barrel was about a meter long, and the caliber was roughly five centimeters.

“Isn’t this a gun?”

“Close. We call this a swivel gun. The projectiles are larger than you’ll find in guns, and it has a longer range. These are even more powerful than ballistae, but... As you might be able to tell, they require a massive amount of iron to make, so they’re costly. The cannonballs take a ton of gunpowder too. They’re incredibly powerful, though.”

“So, these won’t be viable for mass production then?”

“For now, at least. It’ll probably be a different story once we’ve reclaimed the Kingdom of Merinard and its mines.” Still, I doubted there were many situations where we’d need artillery. Based on what Danan and Sir Leonard had told me, the ballistae were probably more than enough.

Basically, weapons of all kinds, especially projectile weapons, were underdeveloped here. At best, they had bows and arrows, javelins, and staff slings, but they hadn’t developed weapons with mechanical components like catapults, ballistae, and crossbows at all.

It was just a guess, but I assumed that was due to the existence of magic. A skilled mage could launch powerful attacks at enemies from even greater distances than with bows and arrows. Naturally, mages held high positions in society and tended to lead. In short, they were often nobles and royalty.

From the mages’ perspective, projectile weapons that could kill from a great distance were a threat to their niche. That was likely why they weren’t fond of the idea of developing such weapons. I had a sneaking suspicion that the magically adept community at large had deliberately suppressed any development that risked upsetting their position at the top of the heap.

On the other hand, it was just as likely that nobody saw a need for more advanced arms when magic was an option. It seemed entirely possible based on the cataclysmic quarrel I’d witnessed between the elders.

“Wanna try test-firing this too? While they normally fire big projectiles, like I mentioned, I actually have a different use in mind.”

“You do?”

“Yep. Gimme a second.” I took out the ammunition from my inventory and loaded it using the command action. It was a lot more reliable than doing it on

my own! I had no idea how to properly load one of these from its muzzle. Once that was done, I turned on the sight for the swivel gun. “I’m gonna shoot it.”

“Okay.”

Boom! The roar of the cannon put the bang of the bolt-action rifles to shame. We saw countless puffs of dust rise up in the badlands.

“Wow, that’s amazing. Did you shoot a ton of small bullets at once?”

“That’s right. They’re called canister shots. They’re about as big as the bullets shot with one of those shotguns I just showed you. You can use them for overpowering enemy numbers as they advance on the fortress.”

If we placed ten of these along the rampart, the enemy wouldn’t stand a chance against us. However, we wouldn’t be able to deploy them with my current production powers. People would also need to be trained to use them, but I only knew how to load it with the command action, so I’d be a poor instructor in that regard.

“I can’t believe you made something like this right under my nose.”

“I had these crafting while I worked on rebuilding the village’s walls.”

They had all taken a ton of time to produce too. After much consideration for power, usability, ammo consumption, and the like, I’d arrived at the conclusion that the bolt-action rifles were our best shot at a workhorse ranged weapon.

Besides the ballista, the other weapons I had shown her were prototypes for my exclusive use.

“Well, the ballista is the only thing we can formally employ—or rather, that I can produce. In a way, it’s like an elongated crossbow, so it should be relatively easy to master.”

In fact, physically strong demi-humans like Shemel might be able to roll the bowstring back all by themselves. Making a giant crossbow just for her could be fun as well.

I also needed to mass-produce the antipersonnel landmines. No other weapon would be as effective in compensating for the drastic difference in numbers.

“Uh-huh. But that...handgun, I think you said it was called? It was kind of pretty.”

“Hm? You liked it? I can make one for you to use if you like.”

“You can?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get right on it.”

I could totally see why Sylphy was interested in the revolver. She’d look super sexy with Pale Moon in one hand and a six-shooter in the other. I wondered whether I should make her a cowboy hat too.

A silver-haired elf cowgirl. Now that’s the type of character I can get behind. You agree, right? You’d like to see it too, wouldn’t you? Anyway, I’ve made enough ammo for myself, so I can probably just give some of it to her. I’ll have to teach her how to use it properly as well. The last thing I’d want is her getting hurt or dying because nobody bothered to explain trigger discipline, I thought as I added Sylphy’s request to the crafting queue on my improved workbench.

Just as I was doing that, Sir Leonard and the others came back, looking panicked.

“Welcome back. Everything okay? Why do you guys look so wigged out?”

“We came back as quickly as we could because we heard this loud noise. What in the world was that?”

Oh, it must have been the swivel gun. Whoops, sorry.

I decided to go ahead and show everyone the weapons I’d completed thus far, since everyone here would use my advanced weaponry themselves or oversee their use during the coming war of liberation. I’d have to show Danan, Melty, Ira, and Cui later.

They all reacted differently. In short, Jagheera and Pirna had more favorable reactions than Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil.

“Wow, these are all incredible. If everybody had these weapons, the enemy wouldn’t stand a chance against us,” Jagheera said.

“The aerial bombs are awesome! It’s incredible that we can attack them from the skies and they’ll be helpless against it!” Pirna chirped.

That was the gist of it. I could see why. Any frontline soldier driven chiefly by the desire to come out on the other side alive understood the value of a higher-yield weapon.

“How do I put this? There’s no glory or warrior’s pride to be found in these weapons,” Sir Leonard said.

“It feels as if our trained bodies and refined skills are but mere scraps of paper before Kousuke’s weapons,” Madame Zamil added.

The two of them looked incredibly uncomfortable. They were fine all through the demos for the ballista and the handguns; those were weapons that they could match with their superhuman physical abilities and refined skills. Don’t get me wrong—they were pretty amazing people. But they didn’t like the antipersonnel landmines, shotguns, or swivel guns *at all*. They could handle a few bullets or the bolt of a ballista flying at them, but it’d be impossible to avoid a storm of bullets and shrapnel.

I shot at Sir Leonard with the semi-automatic pistol, since he insisted he’d be fine, and he really did repel all of the bullets with both of his falchions. *What the hell? Is he from an anime or something?*

“I can read the trajectory of the bullets by watching your eyes and the muzzle,” he told me.

“The bullets are small and fast, but we can dodge them. It’s not so different from a master stabbing at you from point-blank range,” Madame Zamil said.

“Yeah, I think I’d be okay against a handgun too,” Jagheera agreed despite having to puzzle it over. *For real?*

“Well, we can avoid shots from handguns well enough. However, the shots from a bolt-action rifle are too quick—they would be impossible to dodge at point-blank range.” Even Sylphy was confident in her ability to avoid small arms fire. I mean, I had a feeling, but...

“Really? Hmm, then maybe I’m headed in the wrong direction with the weapons I’m trying to develop.”

Jagheera disagreed. “No, I don’t think so. Your weapons are powerful, and that’s a fact.”

“That’s right,” Pirna said. “I’ve never seen such powerful weapons for harpies before.”

“I believe these weapons are more suitable for humans. I agree that their concept is good—or rather, I agree that they are excellent weapons—but the results are the same whether it’s us or the humans behind them,” Sir Leonard said.

Madame Zamil nodded. “He’s right. Humans are weaker than we are; that has always been our edge. I thought that hand grenade was a good weapon—we can throw farther than humans can. However, I did find them a bit too light.”

As for Sylphy’s opinion on the matter: “I’m worried about what’ll happen if the Holy Kingdom manages to steal Kousuke’s weapons. I don’t think they’ll be able to make imitations right away, but things will likely get out of control if they start using the same weapons.”

“Yeah, it’d be scary if they stole our weapons.”

It would be exceedingly bad if they reverse engineered their spoils and weapons of mass destruction became commonplace in this world. I said this to Sylphy once before, but knowledge of these weapons was extremely dangerous.

Crossbows were easily copied, and gunpowder could be created together with substances unique to this world or through magical means. After all, this was a world of magic and alchemy. Our enemy could potentially analyze it using some kind of appraisal magic and then reproduce it with alchemy or something.

“Nrghmm...”

“Kousuke’s groaning,” Sir Leonard remarked.

“He could be at it for a while. I’m gonna go look at the field,” Jagheera said.

“I’ll come too.”

I mulled things over as I watched Jagheera and Pirna heading off toward the field.

First, we needed to win. That was why I had come up with weapons that could efficiently kill people—because we needed the power to win and take the kingdom back.

However, the weapons I'd made were originally intended for people to kill one another on Earth, so of course they were meant for killing *humans*. They were designed with human operators in mind as well. Was it time for me to invent weapons made for demi-humans instead?

But that still doesn't negate the fact that it'd be bad if the enemy wound up getting a hold of our weapons. Hmm, maybe I need to completely reverse my original idea?

My original idea had been to ratchet up our destructive potential. Perhaps I needed to start addressing what Sylphy brought up before—how to use this power to *save* people. I'd made all these weapons to beat the Holy Kingdom and reclaim the Kingdom of Merinard. In other words, recapturing territory using military force.

Lemme try reversing that idea. This time, I'd think up a means of reclaiming the kingdom that didn't get any blood on our hands. *A means other than direct use of military force... Hmm?*

Perhaps instead of taking it back by using force, we could try to negotiate for its restoration instead?

Nah, there's no way. The Holy Kingdom's a fanatical theocracy. Plus, their ideology excludes demi-humans. If they were open to more peaceful solutions, then they never would've invaded Merinard and turned it into a vassal nation to begin with—not this way, at least. Not at first. Pass.

Then should we just give up on reclaiming the kingdom? Nah. Sylphy and the others are very keen on getting their homeland back. I'm sure that reclaiming it is a necessary goal. Urrrrgh...

As thoughts whirled in my head, Jagheera and Pirna came over in a hurry.

“That field is amazing! The crops grew so fast, they're practically ready to harvest!” Jagheera exclaimed.

“With fields like this, I bet we could live in the Great Omitt Badlands. There's

water, too,” Pirna said.

“That’s it!”

Yeah. Maybe we could just make a new Kingdom of Merinard here in the Great Omitt Badlands instead. I can make as many safe homes and roads as we need, and with my farming blocks, we can make the badlands bloom. And the harvest would be fast.

I don’t know how long this artificially hastened growth will last, but even if the effect fades with time, I doubt it’ll be any worse than regular fields.

I’ll build fortresses, roads, towns, a whole country in the badlands. And then the demi-humans who have been suffering under the Holy Kingdom will flock to us, and we’ll increase our national power. I doubt the Holy Kingdom will turn a blind eye, but we’ll fend them off using our technological edge. When the time comes, we’ll annex Merinard.

We would have to be patient, but I was pretty sure that the situation wasn’t urgent. The kingdom had been a vassal nation for a long time now, and Danan and the others’ rebellion had happened some years ago. While I could understand why some would want to get it back as soon as possible, the reverse was also true, since so much time had passed.

It was obvious that my crafting powers were better served for defense than offense anyway.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s it’?”

“I don’t know if everyone will agree to this plan or not, but...”

I told everyone the plan I’d just come up with, thanks to Jagheera and Pirna. Everyone contemplated my idea, their faces pensive.

“Hmm, it’s not a bad idea,” Sir Leonard mused. “Our numbers are few. We could win the war with your weapons, but the fact of the matter is that it will be difficult to retain the occupied towns and land. It makes sense to prepare ourselves here in the badlands, recruiting allies and increasing our numbers.”

“There must be many demi-humans hiding in surrounding countries. If they learn that their princess is alive and well and that she’s cultivating the badlands,

I am certain they will come,” Madame Zamil said.

“But do you think the Holy Kingdom is just gonna stay quiet about all that?” Jagheera asked.

“As Kousuke said, his weapons *would* be an effective deterrent.”

Everyone but Sylphy seemed on board with my idea. However...

“I want to get our country back as soon as possible,” Sylphy said in a strangled voice, dampening the supportive mood.

I’d figured as much. Sylphy’s elven relatives had probably been enslaved by the Holy Kingdom, their dignity continuously violated even now. I completely understood how she felt.

“However, Kousuke’s idea is a pragmatic one,” Sir Leonard replied. “There’s no getting around our headcount problem. We have no course of action after using Kousuke’s powers to rain death upon the Holy Kingdom. Do you get what I’m saying? Kousuke’s powers aren’t almighty. We’ll be fine while we still have plenty of resources for our assault, but it’ll be all over for us if we run out while we’re on the defensive.”

“That’s right. My powers can’t make handy things out of nothing. Without a supply chain, I’m just a regular human who can move in weird ways.”

It was highly probable that we’d burn through our reserves if we were continuously attacked from all directions, and then it’d be checkmate. Plus, Sylphy and the others’ combat abilities would suffer immensely if they depended on my powers. The moment we lost the brief edge I’d afforded them, we’d get steamrolled.

“Fine. Let’s go with that plan. We will make our base in the Great Omitt Badlands and build up our strength here. But I don’t think that’s enough. We need to come up with a way to infiltrate the Kingdom of Merinard and draw its people here,” Sylphy said.

“Yes, that’s true. I doubt the Holy Kingdom has stationed much of its army outside of the capital and cities. I also agree that we need to visit the smaller villages, liberate our brethren, and guide them to our new land,” Sir Leonard said.

“There’s sure to be human compatriots hiding in the kingdom as well. They can move much more freely than demi-humans can. Perhaps they would be willing to spread word of our efforts,” Madame Zamil suggested.

Jagheera and Pirna also nodded their agreement.

“I’m in favor as well. I should come up with equipment for undercover operations,” I said.

Something like camouflaged clothes and cloaks. Also, backpacks that can carry lots of things. Portable water purification systems and rations that can keep for a long time would be helpful too, I bet.

Maybe I should make something like an underground shelter somewhere near the border of the kingdom. It’d be a hard-to-find emergency shelter that also stored supplies. Should I make silencers for the rifles too? Or would crossbows be sufficient enough? I’d like to hear what Jagheera and Cuvi think about this.

“You look like you’re thinking about all kinds of things.”

“I am. This special ops division we’re dreaming up is going to need all kinds of specialized kit and somewhere to hunker down that the enemy will have trouble ferreting out.”

“You’re wearing a much nicer expression than when you’re thinking about lethal weapons.”

“Really? I can see that.”

I did feel much more relaxed now. Plus, it sounded like the rescue missions would be left to others. I needed to outfit the base and expand it.

I’m glad we could come up with a firm plan and a new goal. We haven’t talked about it with Danan and the others yet, but I’m sure they’ll approve. I’ve got a lot I want to talk about with Ira, so we should head back to the village once we’re done with the harvest.

The next day, we harvested the crops, crossed the badlands again, and arrived at the Black Forest. We made it back to the elven village without any incidents.

“I am glad to see your safe return, Your Highness.”

Sylphy returned Danan's nod. "Yes, I'm fine. We made it back okay."

She wore the revolver I'd made for her this morning in a leather holster on her hip. I'd given her a lecture on gun safety and marksmanship yesterday, so I figured she'd be able to handle it.

By the way, while Sir Leonard had been able to easily defend himself against a .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol, he said that he'd have trouble dealing with successive shots from a revolver, which used .357 magnum bullets. It had to do with how its initial velocity was nearly twice as fast. That probably made it much more powerful, too.

Pirna was immediately surrounded by other harpies.

"How did it go?!" one of them asked.

"I can't talk that much about it yet," Pirna told them. "But it went well."

"So that means that people'll stop calling us 'turd birds' from now on, right?!"

"Probably. Though I'm sure there'll be some other problem."

The harpies had a reason to be eager for a new weapon of their own: Up until now, their duties on the battlefield had been limited to scouting from the skies and "bombing" the enemy.

Naturally, they had no gunpowder or anything of the sort, so by "bombing," I meant that they'd drop something hazardous to tank enemy morale—the same way armies might use big rocks, boiling water, and hot oil. Wise people in the audience have probably already put two and two together, but they had a more...effective material at their disposal.

That's right: poo. They'd scoop it right out of the toilets. The ladies had to endure the stench as they flew above the enemy again and again to dump buckets of the stuff over their heads. For this reason, the enemy (mainly the soldiers of the Holy Kingdom) had given them the nickname "turd birds."

Harpies were fastidious by nature. They bathed daily and never shirked grooming their feathers. Females were more common than males, and they liked being fashionable and put together. So the epithet was an intolerable insult. Also, they detested the idea of being forced to schlep more whatsit when

war broke out again. And it wasn't just them—nobody wanted to go near something that reeked.

“Thank goodness! Thank the gods!”

“That means we don't have to carry that smelly stuff any longer, right?!”

“That was gonna break me, y'know. You just can't get rid of the smell for a while after.”

The ladies wept with joy. While it was true that they'd be dropping actual explosives from now on and they wouldn't reek anymore, the soldiers were gonna hate them even more than before. That was probably the other problem Pirna had mentioned. If I were a soldier, I'd call them something like “shitbirds” or “those fucking harpies” or just keep calling them “turd birds” anyway.

If they got caught, they'd probably be treated as badly as a sniper in the same position. I had to make sure to put their safety first.

Putting that topic aside, we had to inform everyone that our first base was completed and that we had changed our plans. The de facto council gathered to meet at the usual place—Sylphy, me, Danan, Melty, Ira, Cuvi, Sir Leonard, Madame Zamil, and Shemel. We drew a pretty large audience this time. This was a meeting to decide their futures, after all. Spectators had no right to speak, but they were allowed to listen. This was only possible because of how few people there were and the situation at hand. We couldn't let ourselves get used to the arrangement.

“So our first base has been successfully constructed. The walls around it are seven meters high and two meters thick, and there are enough lodgings inside to support over three hundred people. Kousuke also dug multiple wells, and we've tested the quality of the water. It's safe to drink.”

I heard joyful murmurs among the spectators.

“Thanks to Kousuke and his powers, we also learned that we could farm there. The crops will grow differently than those in regular soil, but making the base entirely self-sufficient very quickly should be possible, depending on how things go.”

This prompted some confused murmurs, and I understood their reaction.

Reclaiming a veritable wasteland took a lot of hard work. Removing rocks and boulders and improving thirsty, barren earth took years, maybe even decades. Of course, saying it'd be easy to live self-sufficiently out there right away would come off as suspicious.

“To tell the truth, Kousuke’s power seems to have no bounds. There are numerous things that need to be tested. I’d like to send about fifty people to the base and have them put Kousuke’s farmland through its paces. Meanwhile, I’m planning to start work on constructing our second base.”

“Very well. How many bases do you intend to build in total?” Danan asked.

“Good question. I’m still thinking it over, but as you know, we plan on eventually handing the first base over to the elves of the Black Forest. Therefore, it’s the second one we build, and beyond that, that we can truly call our own. Does that make sense?”

Everyone nodded at Sylphy’s response.

“We need at least three bases total: one to make various exchanges with the elves, one to be our headquarters, and one to serve as our front line of defense. We’ll also need multiple shelters in between each base. As we originally planned, we’ll build them to be small places that are reachable by nightfall for people to spend the night in and then leave in the morning. As for the location of the base, which will be our front line of defense...” Sylphy paused to look at everyone in turn. “We’ll build it a five-day walk from the Kingdom of Merinard’s border. Somewhere in the middle of the badlands.”

Now this caused a real uproar. Since this was a plan to reclaim the kingdom, it made sense to shorten the soldiers’ march as possible to lessen their fatigue. Five days’ march would be exhausting, and they were more likely to be attacked by gizmas.

“Pardon me for asking, but why did you decide on that location?” Danan asked.

“Hmm, well, there’s been a change in plans. For starters, there aren’t many of us.”

“This is true.”

“We could win in the short term if we used Kousuke’s weapons. Probably. However, we don’t have the numbers to keep what territory we reclaim. Isn’t that right?”

Danan closed his eyes at Sylphy’s question. In other words, a yes.

“I’ve discussed this in great detail with Leonard and Zamil, and I’m thinking of changing our plans. That doesn’t mean that I’m trying to ignore you all, of course. I want to discuss this now until we reach an agreement.”

“I understand. So, by putting it five days from the border, we’ll know where the Holy Kingdom’s troops are garrisoned and if they’ll invade.”

“That’s right. I plan to use the badlands as a natural stronghold. At the same time, we’ll have small units invade the kingdom from our side to liberate the citizens living in villages and towns in the countryside.”

“You’re going to have citizens traverse the badlands with only the clothes on their backs?” Danan grimaced. He was probably recalling his desperate march across the badlands toward the Black Forest.

“We’ve thought about this as well. I’m planning to have Kousuke make safe, inconspicuous shelters underground. They’ll be stocked with food and water, and people can spend the night there.”

“I see. And from there, you’ll gradually gather citizens from the kingdom and increase our strength.”

“Precisely. I also want to get in contact with our compatriots who are in hiding there.”

“By our compatriots, you mean human sympathizers, don’t you? Do you plan to have them spread information? It could leak to the Holy Kingdom too, though.”

“That’s just what I’m hoping for. Plus, that’s where our frontline base comes in.”

If and when the Holy Kingdom got word and sent their army to attack us, we would meet them head-on. Personally, I wouldn’t be a fan of going on a five-day trek through gizma-infested badlands to attack a fortress.

"I understand your plan now. In brief, you wish to build our strength in the badlands and then focus our course of action more on reclaiming the kingdom."

"That's right. It means that we'll have to be patient, though. We cannot afford to make any mistakes. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say."

"Your will shall be done." Danan seemed on board with the change in plan for the time being.

Next, Melty raised her hand. "Your Highness, can you tell us in a bit more detail about how we can farm there thanks to Kousuke?"

"Yeah, I guess we should explain. I'll give the floor to Kousuke on this. Kousuke?"

"Huh? Me? Really?"

Sylphy, are you really trying to foist the responsibility of talking to Melty off on me? Oh, she's averting her eyes. She really is doing that.

"Uh, well, I'd like you to take a look at this first." I laid out sacks of wheat across the table. There were six in all. They weighed approximately 60 kilograms each, so I had 360 kilograms of wheat in total.

"What's this?"

"Sacks of wheat. I harvested them from a plot of land that was 32 by 32 meters. In other words, approximately one-tenth hectare or ten acres."

"You harvested this? But you were gone for less than a week, weren't you?"

"Er, yeah. Well, I guess, uh, it was ready to harvest in less than three days?"

"Are you serious?" The look in Melty's eyes frightened me.

"That's just what happened when I created a field with soil I'd made, planted the seeds, and watered it all by myself! I didn't do anything wrong! I don't know what'll happen when other people do it. That's why Sylphy said we needed to test it."

"I see. It's quite incredible that you managed to harvest this much from only a tenth of a hectare... May I look inside?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Melty stood the sack up and untied the rope with much distress. She lifted the lid-like part on the side and opened it. *Huh, so that's how the sack's constructed.*

"The grains are large and their shapes are all equal... This is the highest grade of wheat there is."

"Oh? It is?" I had no idea about this sort of thing.

To be fair, I'd never seen this kind of sack before. The bags of rice I'd seen in the grocery stores were all plastic, and the only wheat product I'd ever seen was the flour you'd keep in your cupboard.

The first time I had ever seen unmilled wheat was after I had arrived in this world. I mean, I had seen it on TV before, but that wasn't really comparable. I'd been addicted to boiled barley and rice for a while, so I'd seen that, at least.

"You harvested this much in less than three days from a one-tenth-hectare field?" Melty grasped the wheat tightly, trembling all over. It was really scary to watch.

Ira's eye had gone blank again too. What was going on?

"Y-yeah? But there's still a ton we don't know, so we need to do more research. I dunno if someone else working the field will be able to get the same results, or if I'd be able to get these same results from soil other than the kind I made, or if we'll be able to harvest over and over again, or what'd happen if someone other than me used the soil I made in a regular field."

"You're quite right—we need to investigate. If it turns out that you're the only person who can harvest this much in three days, then... Hee hee." Melty's eyes scared me! Absolutely terrified me! I had a feeling that if that turned out to be true, she'd have me working the fields all day! I was a crafter and a survivor! I was no farmer!

"Ha ha ha. By the way, what's wrong with you, Ira?" I asked.

After a moment, she said, "There's a secret alchemical remedy that accelerates how quickly things grow."

"Oh?"

“Its effects vary depending on the quality... But your farmland is behaving as if you used the most potent version of the remedy. As if it grew on trees.”

“Ha ha ha. Don’t let it get you down. What I used was basically a fake.”

Another pause. “Okay.”

I somehow managed to get her to recover. I needed her to go back to normal; there were some things I had to ask of her. I also wanted her to be my bulwark against Melty. Sincerely.

“I understand the situation with the fields now. You’re right, we’ll need *at least* fifty able bodies testing the limits of this discovery at the first opportunity,” Melty said.

“I’m glad you get it. Uh, Sylphy? Was there anything else?” I asked.

“Hmm, good question. Does anyone have any questions?”

Shemel raised her hand. “So what you’re saying is that we’re calling off giving the Holy Kingdom the wallop they’re due?”

“That’s right, we’re not going to be attacking them head-on just yet. That doesn’t mean we’re going to be sitting around twiddling our thumbs. A small number of us will infiltrate the kingdom, liberating the villages. It’ll be a considerably dangerous mission.”

“Uh-huh. Well, dangerous don’t mean a thing to me. I’m down with doing anything, so long as it means scaring the Holy Kingdom. I’m still determined to fight ’em. But we’re just trying to gather our strength and allies first so that we can fight ’em, right?”

“Yes, that’s absolutely correct.”

“Okay. You won’t hear any complaints from me.” Shemel seemed easygoing on the outside, but she kept showing glimpses of her inner desire for revenge. I bet everyone who had once lived in the kingdom felt the same to some degree.

“Any other questions? If not, then let’s work out our course of action. We shall clear the way to the new land in the Great Omitt Badlands and liberate the people of the Kingdom of Merinard who are still under the Holy Kingdom’s control. We will then gather our strength and take back the kingdom. We have

a long road ahead of us, but united, we can overcome any trials and tribulations.”

Everyone sitting around the table nodded at Sylphy’s words, and the spectators cheered.

We’d secured a bridgehead into reclamation of the badlands and also agreed to our next course of action. How far would we be able to go with development and espionage before the Holy Kingdom realized what we were doing? It was a race against time.

Far north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily making their plans, a stout man inside a castle was speaking to a person clad in all black, like some kind of spy. His pure white priestly garments with ornate golden embroidery had been taken off and placed near him. Still, his high standing within the clergy was apparent.

“What are the most recent developments back home?”

“Perhaps it is because the Empire is dragging the war out, but the faithful grow weary. Many mages have fallen, and their demands grow louder and more ambitious.”

“Mweh heh heh. Is that so? I see...” The rotund man was sitting on a big bed, a malicious grin on his face as he drank directly from a glass pitcher and then wiped his mouth. The dim room was faintly hot, and the smell of sweat hung in the air. The large man’s skin was slick. “We’ll acquire many wombs if all goes according to plan. In fact, if we keep the men alive and bring them here as well, we could make use of their seed. If I manage to pull it all off...”

“Then the position of cardinal shall be yours.”

The overweight man smirked at the spy, his oily grin growing all the deeper.

“There will be more demand for wombs, but the demand for pets shall increase as well.”

“Hmm, that’s true. I have my mages positioned near our homeland’s border, and we’re prepared to take on any monsters. We might have villages to the

south of Arichburg destroyed by a monster or two. There were gizma attacks the other day near the Great Omitt Badlands.”

“Understood.” After hearing the fat man’s words, the spy disappeared into the shadows.

“Mweh heh heh. Well, you’ve had your break. Beast, now it is time for your exorcism, courtesy of the archbishop. Howl all you want,” the archbishop said as he returned to the bed. There was the sound of slapping and the heartbreaking cries of a woman begging him to stop and to forgive her before a squelching sound began to echo in the room again.

Over the sounds the man was making, no one could have noticed the sound of a water droplet splashing inside the room.

CHARACTERS



ピルナ

Pirna

Chapter 3:

Let's Go Exploring in the Badlands!

WELL, I CALLED IT a race against time, but we couldn't ignore the fact that the Great Omitt Badlands was infested with our friendly neighborhood monsters.

This place used to be the land of the Omitt Kingdom, but somewhere along the line, they picked a fight with the elves of the Black Forest. Shit got real, the elves blasted the kingdom into its component atoms with spirit gem WMDs, and it became the vacant land it was now.

The elves' counterattack was in flagrant disregard of the sane limits of spirit gem tech, so the spirits of the land itself were corrupted, turning it into a wasteland where nothing could grow.

If I had luck on par with a lottery winner, I'd be able to dig up all kinds of precious treasures from the era with my handy-dandy shovel. But savage giant bugs called gizmas ran rampant, unaffected by the corruption of spirit magic.

Shemel, our resident ex-adventurer, summed it up best: "Nobody goes to the badlands 'cause they want to. The only prey there're the gizmas, and while they can net you a decent purse, their materials are unwieldy and the meat goes bad the second you look away. Even if you go all the way to the hinterlands, there's nothin' but gizmas there too."

"And on the other side is what the humans of the Holy Kingdom call the infamous Black Forest. That's even less reason for anyone to go into the hinterlands," Cuvi said with a shrug.

In other words, so long as we didn't cross the heart of the badlands, the people in the Kingdom of Merinard were unlikely to figure out what we were up to.

As for our current situation...

"I get the feeling that we've got more inbound." Ira sighed a little as she rendered several gizmas immobile with a strike of lightning from her mithril

staff.

Right—we were in the middle of fighting a pack of gizmas.

Three days after the meeting, Sylphy, Danan, Melty, and I left the village with fifty citizens. Once we arrived at our first base, I spent the next three days expanding the farmland.

After that, I left the harvesting and proceeding tests to Danan, Melty, and our agricultural team, while the rest of us set out toward the heart of the badlands. A few hours in, Pirna spotted a large pack of gizmas while she was out scouting.

We could have taken a detour, but came to the group decision to go ahead and eliminate them. At any rate, this was going to be the route between the first and next base. It would be best to weed out any dangers along the way ahead of time.

There were six of us and about thirty or forty gizmas, so I decided to slap together a base where we could intercept them and set up a killbox.

My base was a simple one. First, I used the block jump to stack four meters' worth of brick blocks on top of each other. From there, I built a scaffold that was ten meters to each side. With just the one pillar holding up a corner, it obviously wasn't properly supported, but the blocks I put down hung in midair in open defiance of gravity.

Once the scaffolding was finished, I placed ladders, had everyone climb up, and then climbed back down and destroyed the initial pillar on my way back up. Then, our three-meter-high floating interception base was finished. The gizmas would be able to crawl underneath, but I had put a four-block hole in the center of the scaffolding and made parapets. I put the same at the end of the scaffolding too. And that completed it.

Sylphy, Cuvi, and I used the improved crossbows. Ira attacked them with magic. As for Shemel? I gave her a fat stack of boulders from my inventory, and she was lobbing them into the fray one-handed, like a one-woman catapult. Unfortunately, we couldn't make use of aerial bombs from here, so Pirna was watching quietly. She'd fly around the perimeter once in a while, though.

“I gotta say, this base is... How do I put it?” I said. “Making this fight pretty one-sided.”

“We don’t even need to engage these bastard bugs,” Sylphy commented.

The approaching gizmas had to contend with three improved crossbows, Shemel’s stone throwing, and Ira’s magic. Even if they did manage to slip in, they had no way to attack us on our floating base. Any lashing antennae would be easy to spot, so we could just duck behind the parapets. Plus, their antennae weren’t meant for attacking things higher than them, so they weren’t very accurate. Should gizmas crawl underneath the base, we could just attack them from the open hole in the center. I could collect their carcasses before they piled up.

In short, the creepy-crawlies were powerless against us.

“I don’t feel nervous at all, even though we’re surrounded by so many of ‘em,” Shemel said.

“Sorry, but this is how I like to fight,” I told her. “I have no interest in trading blows with anyone or anything.”

“Can’t deny that’s just another one of your quirks,” Shemel said with a laugh, chucking another rock. Her throws were definitely more powerful than our shots. She was punching right through their carapaces.

“Kousuke, wouldn’t it be faster to use the guns?” Sylphy asked.

“It would, but it’s much more economical to use crossbows when we can. Overwhelmingly so.”

“Is that so?”

We finished exterminating the gizmas after about a full hour of sustained fire. Between the first wave and the rubberneckers we wound up drawing in, we’d racked up about fifty kills.

“It feels like we’re flush with gizma materials now.”

“We can’t get magic stones from gizmas. That’s why they’re unpopular.”

“What’s a magic stone?” I looked at Ira, puzzled. Could they use some kind of summoning magic here? Or did you use it for negotiating with demons?

“They’re magical crystals that you can harvest from a monster’s body. They work as materials for making magical tools, magic catalysts, and alchemical ingredients.”

“Huh... So gizmas aren’t monsters, then?”

“We don’t classify beings as monsters just because we can get magic stones from them; we call them monsters because they would do people harm.”

“Okay.”

That was a rather broad system. Personally, I thought it’d be better if they were a bit more particular about how they classified creatures.

“In a select few cases, we have discovered magic stones in monsters that didn’t have them before. That’s why it’s hard to narrow down their classification.”

“I see.”

The question must have shown on my face. It made sense; even I would categorize them that way, then. While I was talking with Ira, Pirna and Cuvi came back from scouting.

“It seems there are no more gizmas in the vicinity.”

“The way ahead is clear. Let’s get going to the next site.”

“Okay,” said Sylphy. “Let’s go a bit farther, then. Kousuke, take care of this scaffolding.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

I demolished the floating base, and we pressed on to conquer the badlands. The base I planned to make today was a smaller one—it’d hold about a hundred people, so it would be about a third of the size. We were going to use this one to scope out a viable spot for our headquarters.

However, this base would likely become the site of various exchanges between the demi-humans and the elves of the Black Forest. If that came to pass, I would need to expand it. At any rate, it was crucial for us to decide on where to build our home base.

We took a midday break along the way and found an adequate spot about two hours of walking after that. It was hilly terrain, just like the first base. This one had a much gentler slope, though. Perfect place for a campsite.

“It’s time for *The Great Outdoors*, starring Kousuke!” I declared.

“Sorry to interrupt you while you’re posing, but can you get to work already? We don’t have that much longer before the sun sets.”

“Oh, okay.” Sadly, my comedy was never appreciated.

Well, I didn’t particularly want to sleep outdoors, so I did as Sylphy ordered and started building. Now that I could use Mirror Mode and Mass Placement Mode, it didn’t take long for me to assemble simple buildings.

“Wow. It’s amazing watching brick buildings come together before my very eyes,” Cuvi said.

“Carpenters and plasterers would feel completely ashamed,” Shemel agreed.

“Ha ha ha. It’s incredible, right?”

The two of them were eyeing the way I was working as they descended the hill. They were going to go out to scout the perimeter. I would endeavor to have a splendid fortress built by the time they returned.

“He’s sure gotten fast,” Sylphy said in admiration.

Ira’s response was quite frank. “It’s abnormal.”

Yeah, this totally was abnormal from a regular person’s point of view. Ira made sure to always remind me of that. Nevertheless, I was going to use my powers to their full extent.

I quickly made us some lodgings and then dug up where I was going to build the walls. Ira and Sylphy helped me with their earth magic while I used a shovel, and together we dug a few holes that were five meters deep and three meters wide.

Once the holes were dug, I could easily place the wall. I built a relatively complicated gate and then threw up some simple walls. Mirror Mode and Mass Placement Mode made placing identical, well-built structures side by side easy as pie. In no time at all, I had built walls that were seven meters high and had

two gates. The walls were fifty meters long on each side, so it was a third of the size of the first base. Surely it was big enough to house a hundred people.

Sylphy and Ira took a break, having expended their magic. Pirna went on patrol again. I moved on to setting up toilets, another infinite watering hole, two-story lodgings, and storehouses. *Now I just gotta make a field*, I was thinking as someone tugged on my sleeve.

“What’s that?” Ira asked, looking reproachfully at the infinite source of water. *Whoops, she noticed already. That was fast.*

“A watering hole. You’ve seen a pump before, right?”

“I know that much. I’m sure you know what I’m asking.”

“Ha ha ha. The world is full of strange things, isn’t it?”

“Your existence is what’s strange. If you’re not going to tell me honestly, then perhaps I should just dissect you.”

“I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

I explained the infinite water source to Ira as she glared at me. It wasn’t like I understood the fundamental truth behind it or its construction. Obviously, I couldn’t explain why dumping a bucket of water caused it to pour until I stopped! By combining the two, you got a spot where you could draw an infinite amount of water! It wasn’t my fault!

“This is so absurd, it outranks every other thing you’ve done so far. I feel like I’m going to lose it,” Ira said.

“Hey, it’s not so bad. Just think of it as a miracle—some kind of miraculous power given to me by the gods or some spirit thing.”

“A miracle? I suppose I can process it if I consider it similar to holy magic...” Ira mulled it over, so I took the opportunity to start plowing a field.

We discovered some things about the farmland within those three days. First, the farmland blocks that I tilled and the seeds planted using my powers grew the fastest. Generally, the crops were ready to harvest within two or three days.

Next, when a person planted seeds on farmland blocks tilled by me, the crops still grew fast, but not as fast as when I planted the seeds. Based on the state of

their growth, it looked like they would take about two weeks at most to be ready to harvest. If someone other than me tilled the farmland blocks and planted the seeds, those crops also grew at about the same rate.

Also, when I plowed regular badland ground instead of farmland blocks, the seeds I planted also looked like they'd be ready to harvest in about two weeks. If someone else were to plant seeds on it, I had a feeling it'd be the same results as when using regular farmland.

Coming at it from the opposite angle, if I tilled the ground using a hoe, it became soil equal to that of a regular field no matter how infertile and rough it had been before. I was able to get rid of pebbles and anything else about a meter underground. Hoes were amazing.

In other words, the crops' accelerated growth was either due to the farmland blocks or my involvement in sowing the seeds. Both factors combined meant the crops would be ready in about three days. With only one of these, it would take about two weeks. That was our estimation, anyhow.

Melty had a huge grin on her face the entire time we were running our tests, while Ira had this vacant look in her eye. *I put Ira through a lot of suffering... But I'm scared of Melty, so I'm just gonna avoid her for the time being.*

I told her that I needed fertile soil from the Black Forest in order to make the farmland blocks. I doubted that she'd make me dig up the whole forest, but I was still a bit worried.

"Holy magic is similar to spirit magic in that it doesn't come from the practitioner. They say that holy magic comes from the gods and spirit magic comes from the spirit world, so maybe Kousuke's power..." Ira muttered to herself with a hand on her small, slender chin. She probably thought that by figuring out the infinite source of water first, she'd be able to adequately explain my crafting power. Wished her luck with that one.

I side-eyed Ira as I plowed the field, thinking about how I was going to make a bathing area next. I also had to think about how to drain it. *I guess I can lay some drainage pipes that go through the bulwark and have it drain down the hill. I can put some tanks and a water source on the roofs. Maybe I'll put piping from the tanks to each shower room and make waterfall showers with a*

constant stream flowing.

For pipes, I can place blocks with holes in them. I can change the shape of the blocks to some extent by imagining it, so that's pretty helpful.

Oh nooooo! The holes aren't lining up for some reason! I gotta try again, again, again!

After much hardship and trial and error, the shower was ready to use around nightfall. I chatted with Cuvi and Shemel during dinner, and then it was time for bed.

The ladies loved the baths.

"You sure do like cleanliness, from toilets to baths. I'm pleased," Sylphy told me.

"It's marvelous that we're able to use water in such a luxurious way in the middle of the badlands," Ira said.

Shemel was all for it too. "It feels so refreshing to be clean. Baths are hard to come by when you're an adventurer, so I'm real grateful."

"It's a godsend. My feathers felt so dry from all of the clouds of dust out there," Pirna chimed in.

Cuvi, who was normally super fluffy, looked like a completely different person wet. "Well, I gotta do this, y'know. I'm scared I'll get ticks and fleas if I don't wash myself properly."

"That makes sense. Here, I'll wash your back for you," I said.

"Thanks. I'll wash my tail myself, so don't touch it, okay? It gets itchy around my butt when people do."

And so we washed each other's backs. *Hanging out naked in the bath ain't so bad.*

The area around our home base might become a large city someday, so we absolutely had to put it on vast, level ground. Having a wide view of the area would be very convenient, be it for expanding the base later on or intercepting

inbound enemies. Objectively, a water source was also crucial, but I could make as many as we needed. If you could ignore the slight absurdity of it all, there was nothing more convenient.

We used the small base as a stepping stone and searched the area around it for the next few days.

“This area looks good enough.”

“It’s got a nice view for sure.”

The land we’d scouted was flat as far as the eye could see, and for some reason, there were no gizmas here. Their absence actually felt weird after how many we’d seen before.

“Why do you think that is?” Sylphy asked.

“Maybe there’s something here that’s been keeping their numbers down?” Cuvi said.

“Huh?” Shemel tilted her head to the side, not buying that idea.

“Hmm, I think it must be something else.” Ira surveyed the area and then raised her staff. A faint ball of light appeared in the sky. *Ooh, maaagic.*

“What’s that?” Sylphy asked her.

“A spell to see if there’s a response to magical waves.”

“Hmm?” Ira’s explanation was so concise, it elicited a collective head tilt of confusion from Sylphy, Cuvi, and Shemel too.

Is it something like passive sonar? I wondered as part of the ball of light turned red and shuddered.

“What was that?”

“It detected a pulse of energy too small for a human to pick up. Many monsters are sensitive to pulses of magic. It can be used to lure them closer or to keep them away.”

“So it’s like a barrier to ward off monsters?”

“In a way. An ancient one.”

“I got it!” Shemel snapped her fingers. “I remember this place now. One night, when we were heading to the Black Forest, we weren’t attacked by gizmas. I’m pretty sure it was around here.”

Cuvi nodded. “Oh yeah, I remember that.”

“I remember it too,” Pirna said.

“I don’t,” Ira said. “Not at all.”

“Probably because you passed out from using too much of your magic,” Cuvi informed her.

The area must’ve been like this for at least a few years, then, so there hadn’t been any gizmas at all.

“But why is there something like that in a place out here?” I wondered aloud.

“This type of barrier is useless against monsters if it’s not emitting pulses regularly. It works by a device storing magic and releasing it all at once. However, the amount of magic required is enormous—it would be difficult to maintain even with the combined power of mages and magic stones. Therefore, this barrier must be set in a place where it can draw an inexhaustible supply of magic from the ley lines themselves. About 300 years ago, we discovered a much more magically efficient barrier device, so this kind became obsolete,” Ira explained.

“In other words, based on that timing, this is a relic from the Omitt Kingdom. They needed this place safe from something.”

“Yeah. I’m surprised it’s still working, but if the nature of the pulses changed for some reason or another, gizmas might invade this area in droves.”

“That’d be scary.”

We wandered around, trying to locate the device making this magic pulse barrier. The pulses covered a hell of a lot of ground.

“I think it’s around here.”

“There’s nothing here,” I told Ira.

“Must mean it’s underground,” Cuvi suggested.

“Good luck, Kousuke,” Shemel said.

“Good luck!” Pirna chirped.

“Thanks.”

We had to dig, which meant it was my time to shine. However, we had no idea how long it’d take me to find the thing, so I would probably have to build a base here too. It was about a half day’s walk from base number two, though. I built this one to be about the same size. That made it base number three.

“Wow, it’s literally the same as the second one,” Cuvi said.

“I’d prefer if you called it *standardized*.”

Although it did appear the same, there were some minor differences. I’d made a water tower in the center of the base with the infinite water source so that each facility could get water. Well, I did wind up making a water source that used a hand pump on the ground too.

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll start digging here,” Ira said.

“Don’t look so depressed about it,” Sylphy muttered.

Cuvi gave a shrug. “We’ll only slow you down if we try to help.”

“Yeah. We’ll just be taking it easy. Give us a holler if there’s something we can help with,” Shemel said.

“There’s absolutely nothing I can do to help when it comes to digging, so just leave watching the perimeter to me!” Pirna declared.

When it came to digging, I would do most of the work; Ira and Sylphy would assist me. Pirna would be flying around keeping watch just in case, while Cuvi and Shemel would be our guards. I doubted we’d be attacked by gizmas, but they thought the barrier might have guardians.

“What kind of guardians?”

“There are a lot of magical creatures like golems, gargoyles, and dragontooth warriors. It’s rare, but some use the undead too.”

“Huh, that’s got some real fantasy vibes.”

“Kousuke, this isn’t some kind of fantasy—it’s reality. Depending on the

mage's skill, some magical creatures can be far more dangerous than gizmas."

"I see. I'll make sure we're strapped on the off chance we tick off the security system."

Since I was done building the base, we'd call it a day and rest up for tomorrow. Before that, I decided to make another pump-action shotgun. One would use shot and the other slugs. I *could* just reload each shotgun with either kind as needed, but with my power, it was easier to just have both ready. Once I finished with that, we'd eat dinner, bathe, and head to sleep.

I made everything for our meal. In my free time, I had been using the item creation function to increase my recipe repertoire.

"The food Kousuke makes is delicious," Ira said.

"I like cream stew," Shemel said.

"I'm a fan of meat dishes," Cuvi said.

"I like those hot dog things!" Pirna said.

"The food he makes without his power is good too," Sylphy told them.

"It is?" Cuvi asked. "Maybe we should have him cook us something from scratch tomorrow."

"Sorry, but my home cooking is for Sylphy's taste buds only," I told him.

"Not fair," Ira murmured. I chose to pretend I hadn't heard it. It would be a huge pain to cook from scratch for this many people, so thanks but no thanks. I could easily make delicious food by crafting it, so that was good enough if you asked me.

"Phew, I'm so tired." I collapsed into bed.

With dinner over, all I had left to do was sleep. I'd been feeling pretty exhausted lately. Well, more accurately, I was stressed out. To be frank, I was beginning to feel a thirst I couldn't quench.

It had been over ten days since I'd last shared my bed with Sylphy. We were just in a really busy stage of the first step in reclaiming the Kingdom of

Merinard. Sylphy and I were always on the front lines, and at night, we were separated. I was starting to develop some pent-up frustration.

The ladies all slept together, so it wasn't like I could sneak into her bed in the middle of the night either. Naturally, Cuvi and I didn't sleep together; our house had plenty of empty rooms.

Incidentally, I was now on friendly terms with Cuvi. A while back, I'd asked him about demi-humans and their sex drives. Basically, most beastfolk had a mating season once or twice a year and had almost zero motivation to get it on at any other time of the year. That didn't mean that they *couldn't* get in the mood off-season, though. Apparently, some beastfolk had the drive all year round, so it was more of a generalization. Cyclopes like Ira, ogres like Shemel, and elves like Sylphy didn't have to deal with the whole estrous cycle thing, but it was hard for their races to get pregnant. On the other hand, they had longer lifespans.

Cyclopes were the race with the longest lifespan after elves, living three hundred years on average. Ogres generally lived for over two hundred years. There were other races like lamias and lizardfolk, but Cuvi said he didn't know about reptilian types, unfortunately. Maybe I'd ask someone else later, like Sir Leonard.

"Kousuke, are you awake?"

"Whoa!"

It wasn't like I was thinking about anything shameful, but Sylphy's voice startled me all the same. I whipped around to find her peering at my face from outside the room. It was kinda cute.

"What are you freaking out for?" She smiled as she walked over to me, making my heart race. Her face looked slightly flushed.

"You just scared me, talking to me like that out of nowhere. What are you doing here? It's so late."

"Can't you tell? I missed you." And with that, she sat on my bed. She smelled so sweet. That was enough to make me feel dizzy. *Stay! Stay! Hold it! Hold it! Not yet, me. Hang in there.*

“Don’t you feel the same?” she asked with dewy eyes. *Miss Sylphy, you’ve come here to murder me, haven’t you?*

“Yeah, I miss you too. But things are making it difficult to be alone, y’know?”

“Sure, but it feels a bit ridiculous to hold back, doesn’t it?” She had a point. Everyone already knew about our relationship. “Shemel said we shouldn’t worry about the others and that we should do it to our heart’s content.”



“Oh, did she now?”

My inner stocks for Shemel gained the maximum allowable amount in a single day. I'd make her whatever she wanted later.

“So, you know... Shall we?”

Sylphy looked so adorable with the way she was blushing, and I didn't think I could hold myself back much longer. I couldn't say these walls were perfectly soundproof, but I'd be as quiet as I possibly could.

The next day. I left my room before Sylphy, got dressed, and then proceeded to my place for breakfast.

“...” Blush and a glare.

“...” Smirk.

“...” Another smirk.

“...” Big blush.

Ira, Cuvi, Shemel, and Pirna all had their own reactions to my entry. *Stop it, everyone. Those looks really get to me.*

“Y'all have fun last night?” Cuvi asked bluntly.

“I'm so jealous you've got somebody to take care of your needs,” Shemel said.

After a pause, Ira said, “How lewd.”

Their words cut me like a knife. *Quit it already! I'm already at 0 HP!* Pirna's face was beet red and she refused to look me in the eye! That hurt too!

“G-good morning, folks,” I said.

“...Morning.”

“Mornin'.”

“Good morning.”

“G-good morning.”

Even Sylphy immediately noticed the unusual mood of the group when she

eventually showed up. She blushed all the way out to the tips of her ears. Naturally, they didn't tease her the same way they did me, but Shemel never stopped smirking. Cuvi managed to get his expression under control, but he overcorrected and ended up looking stern as a Tibetan fox.

"L-Let's have some breakfast. Kousuke?" Sylphy said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Today, we were having cream of corn soup, bread, and a large platter of sausages. Shemel was the only one still grinning as the rest of us began to eat in silence.

Then, just as everyone but Shemel was eating a spoonful of their soup, she made an unbelievably stony expression and went, "'Yeah, I miss you too.'"

"Pffft?!" Everyone else simultaneously spit out their soup. It was a catastrophe.

"Wh-wh-wha—?! How long were you—?!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Shemel didn't answer and ran off, taking the large platter of sausages along with her.

Ira had been sitting across from Sylphy. She fainted in agony like the colonel in *Castle in the Sky*, possibly because she had gotten soup in her eye. Pirna was confused and panicking. Cuvi had reached his limit and started roaring with laughter. Sylphy's face was bright red as she chased after Shemel.

"Why, oh, why?" I asked, but nobody answered.

Despite the sad turn of events, I continued digging, and three days later...

"Hmm?"

My shovel struck something hard. I thought it was another boulder, but it felt different to the touch. I cautiously dug around it to unearth what looked like an unnatural wall of stone.

"Heeey! I found something!" I yelled from inside the hole.

I dug it out completely and placed some cobblestone wall blocks for us to

break into the underground structure. Everyone but Pirna came down into the hole. As a harpy, Pirna wouldn't be able to move at all in a confined space like a cellar, you see.

"What'd you find?" Sylphy asked.

"A stone wall. I think it's from some kind of underground structure."

"I see. Ira, what do you think?"

"It's the right level. This could be it." The side of Ira's magical detection device was practically all red.

"All right, let's break through. Kousuke, you smash a hole in the wall. I'll provide the light. Once we've got an in, Shemel, me, and then Cuvi will go in, in that order. Kousuke and Ira will follow after."

"Right." I made sure everyone was ready, then swung my pickaxe and destroyed the stone wall. At the same time, Sylphy used light spirit magic to illuminate the area, and with Shemel in the lead, they stormed inside the structure.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. No enemies either." Upon hearing Shemel say that, Ira and I went inside as well.

It seemed to actually be pretty big. It had a high ceiling and a path that continued to the left and the right. Was it a hallway?

"Which way do we go, Ira?" Shemel asked.

"Right."

"Got it. Then I'll lead the way. After me should come Cuvi, Ira, Kousuke, Your Highness—can you bring up the rear?"

"Okay. You can count on me," Sylphy answered.

"Our voices echo quite a bit. We probably shouldn't fire any guns in here," I said.

"You've got a point. I'd rather not go deaf."

Resigned to my fate, I took my improved crossbow out of my inventory. I wished I had made suppressors for our automatic pistols.

We got into marching order and carefully proceeded down the hallway. We discovered some rooms along the way, but they were in ruins and contained nothing of note.

“What in the world was this place?”

“I’m thinking it was probably once the underground of their royal castle or a building for court mages. It could also have been some sort of defensive facility,” Ira said.

“If this used to be underneath the castle, then there might be an underground treasury or something. Or a storehouse,” Shemel suggested.

“It could also be a dungeon filled with deep-seated grudges.”

“It’d be a nuisance if there were undead down here, but they’d be near where the barrier’s device is located.”

“Undead are extremely weak to magical emissions before they take hold somewhere. There’s no way they’d form here spontaneously,” Ira explained.

I didn’t know whether anything here had value, but I put every little thing that caught my eye into my inventory as we spent the next half hour exploring. In time, we arrived at a door, and beyond it appeared to be what we were searching for.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“It must be. I’ve seen it in some old book before,” Ira told me.

The room ahead of us was pretty spacious. The ceiling was over ten meters high, and the room itself was about fifty meters long, and maybe wide too; it looked to be squarish. Along the wall across from the entrance was a big pedestal; a shining jewel floated above it. That must have been the device for the monster-repelling barrier.

However, on either side of it stood big, ostentatious statues. Both of them were holding gargantuan mallets, and they looked like they might actually be able to move.

“Those have gotta be golems, right?” Cuvi said.

Turning to Ira, I asked, “Golems wouldn’t happen to have weaknesses, would

they?”

“They’ll have magic stones embedded in them somewhere. That’s what enables them to move. Once those are destroyed, they’ll stop.”

“I see. But they’re not moving now, yeah?”

“They’ll probably attack as soon as we enter the room.”

“So they won’t attack us so long as we’re out here?”

“Probably.”

“How would they react if we attacked them from here?”

Ira hesitated. “They probably wouldn’t budge.”

“Okay. We might be able to do something about them, then.”

The slug shots loaded into shotguns were so-called rifled slugs, so I figured they might still be powerful enough from this distance—just barely. I reckoned I could destroy a stone statue by riddling it with bullets. Plus, its weakness was probably its head or its chest.

If I couldn’t destroy it directly, I also had the option of digging underground, dropping them, and burying them. This way might be smarter, though. I mean, how the heck did they even perceive trespassers?

“Hey, how do they know when someone’s trespassed?” I asked.

“The same as humans: with their eyes. That’s why they’re facing this direction.”

“I see. Then it might be better if I make a hole in the ceiling and cover their heads.”

I could place blocks where they couldn’t reach me up until about five meters away from them. That meant we wouldn’t have to fight them at all!

“This is just plain awful.” Ira sighed, her eye shut as if in prayer. I wasn’t sure if it was because her heart went out to the mages of old, who’d worked so hard to create these guardian golems, or if it was out of pity for the golems that now lay in pieces, unable to complete their duties thanks to my trusty pickaxe.

My strategy for taking out the golems was quite simple. First, I covered their heads with cobblestone wall blocks from the ceiling to kill their sensors. Next, I secured their hands and feet with cobblestone wall blocks and solid concrete blocks. Once they were immobilized, I broke their limbs off with my pickaxe. After those were gone, my combat turn never ended. In less than a half hour, I had broken down the two marble golems into materials.

Their cores were in the middle of their chests, around where their hearts would have been. According to Ira, the mages had treated a material called a magic crystal—which was composed of multiple magic stones—into a thing called a magic mobility stone, a powerful source of magic. I decided to take it since it might be useful for something later.

“How should I put this? Your way of doing things makes you look like a wimp,” Shemel commented.

“As a crafter and a survivor, my way of fighting is to flatten whatever may stand in my way, be it a mountain or a hill.” Doing things the surest and the safest way through a variety of means was the true mark of a survivor. There was nothing to get out of pushing yourself to the limit just for the thrill of it.

“Well, his way of fighting is...nothing like battling someone head-on,” Sylphy said.

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing. Being able to get a sure kill without a single scratch is best, if ya ask me,” Cuvi said.

“It takes time, but he gets results. Kousuke’s style is closer to a mage or assassin’s than a soldier’s.” Ira wasn’t wrong; I’d hardly call my methods those of a soldier. If I had to pick, I’d probably say I was more like a mage. I liked to bend circumstances overwhelmingly in my favor and then strike with all my might. Telling me that I was good at cheap shots or that I played dirty was a compliment in my book.

Anyway, we had gained total control of the entire underground facility now that we had the device for the barrier, and we’d acquired all kinds of loot. This place really must have once been below the Omitt Kingdom’s royal castle; we had even found some documents among the salvage. We’d discovered some decayed corpses too, but based on what they were wearing, they didn’t appear

to royalty.

“There really are valuables down here, just like you’d expect beneath a castle,” Shemel said.

“The problem is that these valuables aren’t much use for us even if we do take them,” Cuvi said.

“Indeed. Expensive works of art are pretty much useless. Though the elves will find some use in the bejeweled decorations.”

“Most of the weapons have decayed beyond use, but I bet we could repurpose them if Kousuke repaired them or melted them down,” Sylphy said.

“We won’t know if the books are beneficial or not without reading them first. However, I’m doubtful that things written over three hundred years ago could be of much use. They do have archival value, I’ll admit,” Ira said.

Pirna greeted us with a big smile when we returned to the surface.

We had secured a safety zone and a location to put our main base. And what did that mean? It meant hell—it was time to start constructing our home base...

As for the construction of our main base... I completed the same simple tasks over and over again. When I woke up, I’d collect the building blocks I crafted in the improved workbench overnight and then build a road in silence. Like mad. In essence, I was laying down the boundaries to fill in later.

With great pains, I was making a town—a city—from scratch. Not only was it the most functional and efficient process, but it would also be easier to expand upon later if needed. I would do the more specific boundary-making after getting some opinions from Melty, people who were more knowledgeable about city planning, carpenters, plasterers, other artisans, and the people who had once been merchants. I was just marking out the rough sections. So I said, but...

“This town’s huge. Don’t you think so too?” I asked.

“Yeah, it is. The first part of Melty’s plan called for accommodations for three thousand people,” Sylphy told me.

“Three *thousand* people?” My eyes bulged. That was ten times more than the number of people who lived in the elves’ village. I had assumed we’d house three hundred people, but it needed to be ten times as big?

“By the way, we need many of the houses to be big enough to house families of four or five people. In other words, we don’t want barracks that’ll sleep sixteen people per apartment.”

“Are you for real right now?”

“Completely. She’s even given me blueprints.”

“Oh...”

The homes weren’t particularly large, according to the blueprints. Two bedrooms, a storage room slash pantry, a living room, a dining area, and a kitchen. That was it. They were simple houses. This construction was what she wanted as a basis.

“We were thinking you could make something similar to the lodgings that you built in our first base in that they’re all connected.”

“So you want apartment buildings?”

That sounded like backbreaking work. If I used Mirror Mode, I could make two houses at a time, but just how many would I need? I felt faint just imagining it, but I couldn’t just sit around feeling sorry for myself. Ira was staying underground, working hard to maintain the barrier device. Cuvi, Shemel, and Pirna were all out there scouting the perimeter. I had to do my part too.

And so I did. I worked my butt off. Day after day, I dug up the ground, built roads, constructed houses, dug up more dirt, and built walls. All the while, Sylphy was there to make me feel better. Every night, after a hard day of crafting building blocks and digging from dawn to dusk, she took good care of me.

Sometimes she was kind. Sometimes she was severe.

“Mommy Sylphyyyy...”

“I’m not your mom.”

The fact that I unconsciously regressed was only a matter of course, if you

asked me. I toiled away doing repetitive tasks and digging day after day. Ira helped me out with the construction with her earth magic once she was finished doing maintenance on the barrier device, and she did some kind of work on the protective walls I had erected. Something about fortifying their resistance to magic. I didn't really understand her theory, but it had something to do with the magic from the ley lines and the barrier device.

Cuvi, Shemel, and Pirna decided to head back, report on our progress, and bring the first group of people here. They had nothing to do, since gizmas wouldn't come near while the barrier was active.

"You better not bring Melty with you, okay? You gotta stop her," I pleaded.

Cuvi laughed. "Ha ha ha. Well, see ya!"

"Hey, you gotta promise me!"

The three of them dashed away. They were totally going to bring Melty back with them, weren't they? It was plainly obvious that I was going to have even more work to do.

"Sylphy."

"Yeah?"

"Let's run away. Just the two of us."

"Are you crazy?" She whacked me across the head. But she was blushing, and her expression told me she wasn't annoyed. My mistress was so cute.

It was just the three of us now, so we had to figure out what we were going to do at night. It felt kind of awkward leaving Ira by herself while we were busy getting frisky elsewhere, so I asked Sylphy what she thought we should do.

"Kousuke."

"Hmm?"

"Am I not enough for you?"

"What?!"

Sylphy seemed to have completely misunderstood what I was asking her. That was totally not what I was trying to get at. I'd said that we were probably going

to have lots of guests in about a week, so I asked her if she wanted to sleep with Ira until then. A girl might not like the idea of sleeping by herself in this huge ghost town, right?

I frantically tried to explain myself. While I did think Ira was cute, that wasn't what I was suggesting at all. Sylphy was all I needed. In fact, I felt like I didn't even deserve her. *C'mon, words, work right so she understands how I feel!*

"Oh, I see..."

My desperate explanation seemed to work or at least clear up the misunderstanding. Phew. I wasn't sure of my persuasive abilities, but I felt like Sylphy's affections toward me intensified.

"Hmph." On the other hand, Ira's mood soured. I wondered why.

Be that as it may, Ira was indeed afraid of sleeping by herself, so she gave a quick nod when I suggested they sleep together. While we knew that there wouldn't be any gizmas or undead showing up as long as we had the barrier, the darkness, solitude, and stillness of night put fear into anyone's hearts.

Me? While I would be sleeping in a separate room, we'd still be in the same building. It was no big deal to me. Plus, I could keep them from spawning with torches...or so I hoped.

Five days later, the end of my work was still nowhere in sight. That day, just past noon, several people arrived at the home base site. Melty and the rest of the core council we'd left with the elves had come with about a hundred citizens from Merinard in tow. Cuvi and Shemel weren't with them.

"My, what a spacious place you've found!" Melty shouted. "I see that you've just about got all of the boundaries marked too. By the way, I've got much more detailed plans here... Kousuke? Where are you going? Don't run away! Catch him!"

"No! Lemme goooo!" I tried to run, but Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil caught me. *Daaang, you two are fast!*

"My apologies, Kousuke," Sir Leonard said.

“This is part of our duties as the strong,” Madame Zamil added.

“Nooo! I don’t wanna die!” I wailed.

“Please don’t say such scandalous things. Nothing of the sort shall befall you.” Melty was smiling. She looked like a sheep with those curly horns of hers, but I bet she was actually a devil under the fluff. I just knew it! She couldn’t fool me! “You seem tired from working so hard every day. Don’t worry, we’re not in any rush. I promise that you’ll only work exactly eight hours a day, stop working on time, and have two-day weekends. See, you have nothing to fear.”

“Really?”

“Really! Have I ever lied to you before?” Melty looked straight into my eyes with an earnest look on her face.

I guess she hasn’t ever lied to me, now that she mentions it. She’s made ridiculous requests before, but nothing too terrible has ever happened to me. I’ve always been able to laugh it off, at least.

“Okay, then. And you’ll give me some kind of reward for my efforts, right?”

“But of course. Do you think Her Highness is the kind of person who’d just make you work for free?” Sylphy nodded quite solemnly at Melty’s words. At first, I wondered why Sylphy was the one responding, but then I realized that Melty’s job had always been to make Sylphy’s ambitions a reality.

While Melty would be the one to assign my work, Sylphy would be the one rewarding me. *Okay. Melty’s not trying to fill her own pockets by taking advantage of her position here.*

“At the moment, we’ve got to keep relying on you to get things done. I think this goes without saying, but I’ll do whatever you want as long as it’s within my power, and if there’s anything you want, I’ll give that to you as well. You’re already receiving what I can give beyond that,” Sylphy said.

“Hm? You said you’ll do whatever I want, right?”

“Huh?”

“That’s what you said, right?”

“Indeed, she did. Our princess is truly kind, in that she recognizes people’s

contributions and shall give them rewards of adequate value,” Melty chimed in.

“Is that so? So she’ll do whatever I want her to, then. What shall I have her do for me?” I started imagining all of the things I could get her to do. Mwa ha ha!

“Hee hee.” Sylphy chuckled, realizing she’d been tricked. “Well, that’s fine. You’re ready for what’s to come, right, Melty?”

“But of course I am. I am Your Highness’s devoted servant.” Melty didn’t seem perturbed at all, even in the face of Sylphy’s threats. If you asked me, this curly-horned lady was the most dangerous of us all.

“Hey, is she going to be okay? As a servant, I mean,” I whispered to Danan.

Danan let out a dry chuckle. “Yeah, she’d hardly qualify as a servant. However, Melty and Her Highness have been friends since they were young. Melty’s mother was Her Highness’s wet nurse, you see. They’re more like foster sisters, although they do mess with each other once in a while.”

“Huh, I had no idea. Sylphy rarely tells me about her past.”

“I’m sure she has her reasons. Please continue to support her.”

“I will, of course.” I planned to remain by her side no matter what happened; there was no need for him to ask.

Far north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily toiling away, a stout man clad in white and gold priest’s garb was chatting with an armored knight inside a castle. As ever, his high standing within the clergy could be gleaned from his attire.

“How are the preparations going?”

“They are going as planned, Your Excellency. We continue to gather the stipulated provisions for the army; all that remains is to move the troops when the time is right.”

The portly man looked puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

“Your Excellency, it will greatly impact the circulation of goods and whatnot when we move the troops within the territory all at once. The Holy Kingdom’s

army is also tasked with maintaining public order within these borders. If we mobilize so many, the surviving rebels who've been in hiding in the three years since the uprising might take an opportunity to strike."

"The surviving rebels... Ah, you mean *them*." The man's big face contorted into a grimace.

Three years ago, a rebellion had gathered momentum here within the Kingdom of Merinard, which was now a vassal nation of the Holy Kingdom. While they had managed to suppress the revolt somehow, his plans had been delayed for three years. It was something he preferred not to remember.

"Well, so long as things are coming along smoothly, that's all that matters," he said.

Judging by the timing of the recent gizma population explosion, everyone in the rebel army who fled to the Great Omitt Badlands died. No one will appear to upset my plans at this stage.

With a restless air, the knight and the archbishop were so wrapped up in their conversation in the clergyman's office that they didn't hear the sound of a droplet of water splashing.

CHARACTERS



ダナン

Danan

Chapter 4:

Let's Start Preparing for War!

NOW THAT WE HAD a hundred people and most of the major players here, we began the full-scale building of our home base. I say we, but I was the one building it, you know? It would take years to make a base of this scale through regular ol' manual labor.

"I can't carry you forever. I want you to put your all into this very first step."

"Yeah."

I really wished they didn't expect me to build the whole town by myself. That came with its own problems. Having a one-man engineering corps would wreak havoc on the job market and undermine the community's self-reliance.

First off, we needed to feed a hundred mouths, so I had to make fields. As of the first expansion, I planned to make them inside the walls. By enclosing the fields within the base, it would be easier for us to hold the city during a siege. Plus, we had an inexhaustible supply of water.

When it came to meals, we were subsisting on whatever our entourage managed to bring and what I had in my inventory. However, it wasn't like we had that much surplus, so it would be best if our first harvest was ready as soon as possible. I decided to spend the whole day working in the fields.

I'd leave the citizens to tend to the fields after I sowed the seeds in the farmland blocks. They could deal with the watering, harvesting, and replanting.

"To think that this area's crops will all be ready to harvest in three days... Dear me, what an alarming thought," Sir Leonard said.

"The very notion of supply trains is ruined with Kousuke here," Madame Zamil said.

Thanks to me, we would have enough food to feed everyone in three days. After that, with other people manning the fields, we'd be able to harvest the same amount within two weeks. Our pantries were going to be bursting.

“If we bring more people here, then the amount of food consumed will jump. We need a systematic means of producing food.” Melty was serious about this. She was single-handedly managing the harvest. Depending on how well she managed things, three hundred people could starve, so it was a very heavy burden for her to bear. She couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

About half of the people we brought here were skilled in combat. Several of them formed parties and explored the perimeter. We had the means to acquire food and water here already, so they were mostly searching for mineral resources, historic ruins, and other valuable miscellany. By now we’d heard back.

“Nothing out of the ordinary to the east. There wasn’t anything worth noting either. Starting tomorrow, we’ll start heading out farther toward the edge.”

“We found the ruins of several buildings to the north. There might be historic relics and the like.”

“To the west is the mountain we can make out from here. It looks rocky. It could be an untapped source of mineral resources. I’ve brought back ore samples.”

“What kinds of things would be of value?” I asked Sylphy and Ira, who were scrutinizing the reports they had received. What was I doing? Well, y’know. I was taking a bit of a break. I wasn’t skipping out on work or anything, I swear.

“The ruins of the Omitt Kingdom lie untouched under these badlands. Most contain nothing of value, but there is the rare chance that we might find treasure down there,” Sylphy explained.

“Also, there have been times when the local spirits’ power gets concentrated in one spot—it’s a knock-on effect of the place’s spiritual imbalance. People have been able to collect special ores and minerals from those hot spots before,” Ira added.

“For now, they’d be excellent trade goods to send to the village. In the future, we’ll benefit from maintaining a stock for our own use.”

“They make for valuable alchemical reagents and magic item components.”

“I see,” I said.

Sylphy was already anticipating trading with people other than the elves. Traders were formidable. If we could trade the resources and treasures of the Great Omitt Badlands and goods made by the elves of the Black Forest, we could expect some folks to integrate us into their trade routes in spite of our tensions with the Holy Kingdom. Probably.

I continued on for about a month constructing our home base.

“Phew. Some way or another, we did it.” I murmured as I looked down at our base from atop the walls.

“All thanks to your hard work,” Sylphy said.

As the first stage of our plan had set out, our base was a citadel surrounded by a bulwark five hundred meters long and wide.

Before us was a town—no, a city made of stone. The main materials were stones and boulders I had torn up in the badlands. The stone walls were made with gravel and the like, as well as concrete. It was filled with sturdy buildings at a glance, but in a corner of the city behind the walls was a vast field. There, several citizens of the Kingdom of Merinard were diligently tending our crops.

Hammers smacking down rang out from another corner of the city. Shifting my focus their way, I saw several water wheels turning eagerly. That was the artisan’s district. It took the combined efforts of Ira, me, and some of the mages, alchemists, and artisans we’d brought along in concert to knock it all into shape. While the city had food, water, and safety, it was lacking in offensive capacity.

“I’m really glad that we don’t have to worry about fuel anymore.”

“Yeah, I don’t think we could’ve withstood hauling any more things from the Black Forest than we already have.”

It was a three-day walk from the Black Forest to our home base. We wished we could use horse-drawn wagons, but unfortunately, we didn’t have any, and neither did the elves. There weren’t any roads either. The only option was for people to carry things on their backs, but that was tiring. There was also the constant danger of gizma attacks beyond our safety zone.

We needed *something* to burn for cooking and keeping ourselves warm—firewood, charcoal, whatever. The Great Omitt Badlands had nothing to offer on that front. The only things to be found here were rocks and dirt. Ira, the mages, and the alchemists came up with a clever solution, however.

When we were contemplating how to transport firewood, Ira was silent for some time. Eventually, she said, “I think we can help if it’s just cooking and heat. This city is a concentration point for ley lines—a node, to use the official terminology. It should be simple to devise a way to tap magic for cooking from the ley lines.”

“Magic from the ley lines? But shouldn’t that be harder than it sounds? Wouldn’t we need to, like, give magical items to all of the families or something?” I asked.

“It should be easy enough with your help. If you can make alloys out of mithril, silver, or copper, then it won’t be too difficult for us to make items that heat objects up. Their construction is simple. Absorbing magic from the ley lines will be easy if we use the barrier device. We can make devices for storing magical power in various places above ground and distribute the magic to them. If we also make these with mithril, then we can make several; they’ll be a bit bigger if they’re alloys, but we’d only need about a shed’s worth at most,” Ira explained.

“I see. What do you think, Kousuke?” Sylphy asked.

“If you want alloys, then it should be doable as long as you can tell me their proportions and names, if any. I’m interested to see what we come up with when we combine my crafting powers with magical techniques.”

“It should prove quite interesting. Plus, it’ll help me fill some gaps in my study of your abilities, and until we solve our fuel problems, we’re at a deadlock on every other front in development. If we’re successful, it’ll mean more work for our residents, so I propose that we go ahead,” Ira agreed.

Thus, over the second half of that month, Ira and the mages, the alchemists, the artisans, and I concentrated our efforts into developing the tools and machinery necessary for our ley line power grid.

“Shall we head over to the artisan’s district?”

“Sure.”

We descended the wall and made our way over to that part of the city. Right now, the district was busily churning out a plethora of things: home heating devices, crossbow bolts, swords, farming tools, kitchen knives, pots, wooden boards and tableware... The artisans used a magical furnace to extract iron from iron ores, treated it, and then—using the manufacturing machines powered by water wheels—processed the iron into all kinds of things.

“It looks like the water wheels are turning well.”

“Yeah, it does.”

We kept a battery of machines running on hydro power—saws, lathes that cut metal, bellows that blew wind into furnaces, hammers for forging, spinning wheels, querns for milling flour. Even now, there were minds and hands at work in the quarter devising new tools to exploit it.

I discovered in the midst of all this that I could upgrade my workbenches by integrating them into the hydropower system. Unfortunately, I couldn’t move them from where they were put down. Since that would mean all kinds of problems, I was still looking for another way to upgrade them.

We were able to employ the use of so many water wheels because of our infinite sources of water. Thanks to those, this home base ought to remain decently productive even in my absence. It went without saying, though, that I could do everything faster by myself.

While we were able to do something about our fuel trouble, we still needed to be able to procure wood. *I guess I should plant a forest outside the walls. If I use the farmland blocks, I bet the trees will grow at an incredible speed. If only I had lots of bones, I could test that new special cheat item of mine right about now. Shame that gizma carapaces don’t cut it.*

“We’ve got food, water, a safe place to sleep, manufacturing power—I think our home base is good for now,” I said.

“Yeah, I think we’ll be able to continue on here even without relying on your abilities. Although we’re still missing lots of things.”

“Our home base is finished, which means our frontline base is next. In other

words, it's time for me to show off my real abilities."

"Yeah. After that, it'll finally be time to start thinking about strategy." There was a poignant look in Sylphy's eyes. We were coming up on the point that was the most critical to her.

We decided to build our frontline base a two-day walk from our home base in the heart of the Great Omitt Badlands. We were attacked by gizmas over and over, but I was able to leverage my experience milling out outposts and constructing our home base building the frontline one. More specifically, it was thanks to this:

Intermediate Builder—Place 500,000 building blocks.

****Unlocks the blueprint function.***

I didn't really understand what it meant at first. Like, what blueprint function? However, I had unlocked Mirror Mode and Mass Placement Mode with the Beginner Builder achievement, so I was sure it had to be something that cut down on how much effort it took to build.

After searching from one part of the menu to the next, I finally figured out what the heck the blueprint function was.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I no longer have to fear building bases!"

I constructed a barracks with a single action. I placed ten-meter-long walls and a gate of a relatively complex construction all with a single action. For the walls, I didn't even need to dig for them first; that was all done with a single action as well.

To summarize how it worked, the blueprint function let me set a template for a structure, and then I was able to place blocks using that template. Basically, it was copying and pasting.

By adding the blueprints of structures I built frequently, I could place them in an instant whenever I wanted so long as I had the materials for it. By making a

blueprint of our entire home base, I could place the entire home base in an instant whenever I wanted, so long as I had the materials. If I wanted.

“At this rate, I’m gonna run out of materials like nobody’s business,” I said.

“You’ll have to dig up more, then.”

“Yep.”

While it was easier to put blocks down now, I still had to dig up the materials by hand. Also, for any new kinds of buildings, I had to build those manually first. I could easily get all the blocks of stones and dirt that I needed for building materials from the badlands. I wanted to build a moat too, so I would replenish my materials by doing that.

Normally, I’d dig when building the walls and stock back up on raw materials in the process, but I didn’t need to dig when placing walls with the blueprint function. Since I merely placed the blocks instead of digging this time, I was running on fumes.

“Where did the dirt that you pushed the foundation of the walls onto go?” Ira was greatly perplexed as she dug up the foundation over and over again using earth magic. *I don’t mind if you dig it up, but make sure you put it back.*

Our defensive frontline base was 250 meters by 250 meters, making it the second biggest compared to our main base. It could station about 1,500 people. I put three ballistae in each of the four corners of the bastion, four ballistae by each of the two gates, and a ballista every ten meters along the walls, making a total of 116 of them. It was easy to imagine what their firepower would be like if all operated at once.

“This place is all bark and no bite without people here.”

“Yeah, I doubt we’ll be able to make the best use of this place with only 300 people.” Sylphy smiled awkwardly at my comment.

Just based on the number of ballistae alone, each ballista required three people to man them, which meant that with 300 people, we didn’t have nearly enough people for all of them. We wouldn’t be able to fully demonstrate the abilities of the defensive base I had taken such great pains to build unless we managed to get more help from the people we liberated.

“If we’re going to make the best use of this place, then we’d need at least 500 people.”

“Yeah. I hope we can get even that many to come to us.”

“I’m sure we will, as long you’re the leader. You’re their princess, after all.”

“I hope you’re right.” Sylphy gazed out toward the horizon, where the border of the Kingdom of Merinard lay, with an intense look in her eye. She didn’t sound very confident. I got the feeling that she wasn’t feeling too fond of her position.

The citizens of the kingdom referred to her as “Your Highness” and seemed to respect her, but at times, I felt like Sylphy was uncomfortable with it.

I’ve never given it much thought before, but it won’t be long before we pick a fight with the Holy Kingdom. It’s almost time to take the first step into their territory and find out what the current situation is, I thought as I gazed at Sylphy’s profile, illuminated by the setting sun.

“Hey, Sylphy, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah? What is it?”

Work was done for the day, and we had thoroughly enjoyed our private “sparring” session. Normally, we would just fall asleep afterward, but this time, I decided to strike up a chat with her. In other words, I was taking the first step into deeper territory.

“Will you tell me about your past? About the Holy Kingdom turning the Kingdom of Merinard into their vassal nation, Danan and the others coming to the Black Forest, and everything else that happened before you met me?”

“I guess I should, shouldn’t I? Where do I even begin? I mentioned before that I was sent to the Black Forest out of tradition, right?”

“Yeah, you did. You told me you went there when you were ten to learn how to live as an elf or something like that.”

“That’s right. And it wasn’t long after that that the Holy Kingdom invaded. I was still a child at the time; I was ignorant about the state of the world. When I

thought back on it later, I realized that my father had sent me there for my own safety.”

“Huh, I can see that.”

A king was surely well-informed about the state of affairs in neighboring countries. He must have known that the Holy Kingdom would invade in the near future. It wouldn't be all that unusual if he'd anticipated that and sent his youngest daughter to the Black Forest, far on the other side of the Great Omitt Badlands.

“It's been twenty years now since the Holy Kingdom occupied Merinard. We only surrendered after a violent struggle, and many of our citizens died in the process. My mother and father surrendered the entire royal family, hoping that their people would be spared in exchange.”

“I...see.”

“It doesn't sound like the Holy Kingdom kept their end of the bargain. Apparently, they haven't enslaved our kin and sold them off to other countries, but several villages near the borderlands have been destroyed. People say that they were killed by monsters, but I'm not so sure about that.”

“Sounds suspect to me too.” There wasn't enough proof to convince me otherwise.

“I told you how Danan and the others launched a rebellion three years ago, right?”

“Yup, you did.”

“I was still in the Black Forest at the time. After the rebellion, a new set of refugees would turn up every once in a while. At the time, I only knew what was happening from what they told me. That was how I found out about the revolt.”

“Oh.”

Sylphy didn't get up, but she gazed at the backs of her hands. “I couldn't just sit around and do nothing when I heard about it. I had already grown enough to be considered an adult, and I'd become an adept fighter. I had learned the secrets of how to unleash the powers of the spirit gems that had obliterated

Omitt. I ignored the elders and other adults telling me not to go, took as many spirit gems as I could, and ran out into the badlands.”

“Went as fast as you could, huh?”

“When I think back on it now, I realize how foolish I had been. Danan’s revolt had been quashed, and the survivors were already bound for the Black Forest. It was truly fortunate that I ran into them.”

“Yeah, especially considering how big this place is.”

“Exactly. The Holy Kingdom sent pursuers too. I used the spirit gems to annihilate them, and now the people of the Holy Kingdom refer to me as the Witch of the Black Forest. After that, I returned to the Black Forest. My skin and body changed to look like the way I do today in the moment I completely gave myself over to my hatred for the Holy Kingdom’s pursuers and acted on impulse.”

“Wait, really? What kind of miracle was that?”

Was she trying to say that she had given into darkness when she killed those people, fueled by her hate, and that was what made her look like a dark elf?
Whoa. Cool.

She smiled ruefully as she answered, “Elves are much more closely related to the spirits than other races. The state of our emotions, the circumstances we find ourselves in at a given moment, how and why we use the spirits’ magic—when certain factors line up, our bodies can change. In that moment, I embraced loathing and rage and murdered countless people. I let fear and malice fuel me as I released the spirits to slaughter them, and when I exhausted myself of the destruction, my skin became like this, my body became stronger, and I became more adept at using spirit magic for destruction than for protection or healing.”

“Huh, so you evolved to be more specialized in combat. Elves sure are mysterious creatures.”

“I don’t wanna hear that coming from you.” Sylphy flicked the tip of my nose. I supposed I would be the winner here as far as mysterious creatures went. “They call us elves who have fallen to darkness, dark elves, fallen elves, or

impure filth. In eras of strife we were more plentiful, but these days we're few and far between."

"Huh, interesting. I get it now. Is that why I get the feeling you don't like Danan and the others addressing you like royalty?"

She hesitated a moment before she said, "I was living a tranquil life far away in the Black Forest during my kingdom's time of need. I didn't make it in time to join the rebellion. The kingdom is as good as gone; I don't have the right to be addressed as royalty."

Sylphy guided my hand to her cheek, nuzzling against it. I stroked her cheek just as she desired.

"Everyone understands that the war is necessary, but I *want* this, purely for my own sake. I'm going to sacrifice many lives to get what I want before it's done. I'll be going to hell too."

"And I shall accompany you to its very depths, Mistress."

"That makes me feel better. I love you, Kousuke."

I kissed her, and we exchanged knowing smiles. The night was still young, after all.

Two weeks had passed since I finished constructing our frontline base.

I dug a wide dry moat around the perimeter and filled it with wood spikes. I also added a drawbridge to the gates. If a battle broke out, we planned to pull up the drawbridge and then shower our foe with crossbow and ballista bolts.

I also made an escape route just in case and had prepared a last resort on the off chance that we had to abandon the fortress. After discussing it with Ira, I managed to cook up a way to make explosive blocks blow up from a safe distance. Mwa ha ha ha.

About half of the people of the Kingdom of Merinard who had evacuated to the elves' village—about 150 people—would be deployed here. All of them had to be healthy and have the resilience to endure battle. We'd reached the decision that over 80 percent of the people who had once been trained in

combat, and those who had learned it after evacuating would be here.

Incidentally, the gender ratio of men to women was a surprising 1:22. Out of 154 people, only seven were male—me, Danan, Cuvi, Sir Leonard, Worg the former guard, a blue ogre and former adventurer named Indy, and a monkey beastfolk alchemist named Sykes. I felt kinda sorta really ashamed, to be honest...

“It’s probably better if Sykes doesn’t go walking around on his own.”

“I-I saw my life flash before my eyes!”

We were in the lounge I’d built for the men. Well, that made it sound fancy, but it was just a low-rent man cave, really.

Sykes had burst into our hangout spot after narrowly escaping being dragged into a woman’s room. He was clutching his chest and covered in a cold sweat, fighting to regain his composure. As you might expect from someone who was a monkey beastfolk, his arms were a bit longer than a regular human’s, he had a nimble tail, and he was a little bit hairy. He also had a gentle demeanor and pleasant personality.

“I’ve felt like I’ve been in danger now and then too,” Worg snarled. His expression looked frightening, but I had a feeling he was forcing a smile.

“With so many of us demi-humans here, somebody’s always got a mating heat breathing down their neck.” Indy gave a dry chuckle.

I heard that he had skills that *definitely* weren’t part of a scout’s purview, but I didn’t know what those were. Perhaps he was more of a spy or a thief? He had blue skin and a single horn protruding from his forehead, and he was thin with well-defined muscles. He was among the people I had healed with my splints before—he’d been saddled with a bum arm and leg.

Indy had a heroic—maybe I should say *careless*—personality. About what you’d expect from an adventurer. He seemed to get along with Cuvi and Shemel; I saw him with them often.

Danan, who was sitting down at the same table, was wearing the same expression as them. “It must be a result of our recent stability and everyone’s improved morale from our daily training. We do have problems, but when you

reflect on all that's happened and all that's about to happen, some topics are difficult to broach."

Women had approached Danan and Sir Leonard as well, though they didn't come on to them as hard as Sykes and the others.

"No one's hit on me, though?" I said.

"That's because you're the princess's servant," Cuvi pointed out.

"And that's not the only reason—I dunno about Shemel, but Ira, Melty, Gerda, Pirna, and the other harpies have eyes for you, and it's not exactly *news* to anyone," Indy added.

"What? I didn't know about that!"

"Are you that oblivious?"

I was shocked. *Wait, seriously? Other women have the hots for me? This has gotta be some kind of joke. Now that I think about it, at least one of them is around whenever Sylphy's elsewhere, but they haven't flirted with me at all.*

"The ladies discuss this sort of thing among themselves. You should prepare yourself for the worst when they decide it's time to strike," Sir Leonard warned me.

"Huh? Wait, but what about my relationship with Sylphy? I am her slave, after all. They want a slave?"

"We'd be lost without you, and you're the Fabled Visitor to boot. You're fine," Danan said.

"The elders of the Black Forest have recognized your status, and that's a social position in its own right. You're all set in that regard," Sir Leonard added.

"Wait, really? Wow, I lucked out."

Being a Fabled Visitor held more weight than I thought. I was amazed that it meant I was qualified to marry royalty. That was pretty awesome. But it sounded more like it was more something passed down as legend told like we hand down stories of legendary heroes, so I guessed it fit?

"Anyway, the shortage of men is a serious problem. We need to infiltrate

Merinard and bring back more men as soon as possible, or Sykes's virtue will be in danger," Sir Leonard said.

"Maybe you should all just say yes?" I suggested.

"But there still wouldn't be nearly enough of us. Plus, if we say yes, you'll be pressured to bed Ira and the other ladies too," Cuvi said.

"I'm happy enough with just Sylphy."

"Your devotion to her is appreciated, but bedding a number of women as befits your station is also considered to be a man's generosity," Sir Leonard said.

"And what about you, then?" Worg asked.

Sir Leonard hesitated a moment before saying, "My heart is devoted to my late wife."

"Bit of a double standard, don'tcha think?" Sykes pointed out.

"Hmph." Sir Leonard sank into silence.

Hmm... A harem, huh? I'd be a filthy liar if I said I wasn't attracted to the idea, but at present, I had no practical interest in it. Sylphy was enough for me, or rather, I felt she was more than I deserved.

"By the way, Kousuke, how is the construction of the underground shelters or what have you coming along?" Sir Leonard asked.

"Way to change the subject. Eh, whatever. It's going well; they're pretty much done. All I have to do is build one once and then I can make another in an instant as long as I have enough materials."

"Your power never ceases to be useful. That means it's just about time, then, right?" Sykes said.

"Indeed. We've already begun picking people to go. I'm sure they'll announce that we're starting the operation very soon."

"Our first order of business will be to travel to the villages in the borderlands, liberate the people there, and then protect them at the bases, right?"

"We've already finished supplying them with food, water, and ammunition."

“By food, do you mean those block cookies?”

“Yup.”

“Those are pretty delicious.”

The block cookies were a squarish nutritious food that I could craft. Each cookie was as thick as my thumb and filled with dried fruit, honey, nuts, oils, and stuff that had been kneaded together and baked. It had a crumbly texture.

Huh? That sounds familiar, you say? Like some snack that starts with “C” and ends with “alorieMate”? Never heard of it. This is a strictly proprietary nutrient-dense recipe of my own design; do not steal. Ha ha ha.

As it so happened, the ingredients for the block cookies were all grown at our home base. I made a decently sized field at the frontline base as well, but its produce was to be used and stored there. Be that as it may, the people we freed from the Kingdom of Merinard would probably stay here for a time, so the stockpile wasn't just for the war effort but also for helping those people recover their strength as well.

“Kousuke, are you here?” Just as there was a pause in our conversation, we heard the clear and beautiful sound of Ira's voice as she suddenly popped her head in through the doorway.

According to Cuvi and Indy, she had her sights (would it be *sight* in this case?) set on me...

“Kousuke?”

“Uh, sorry. What's up?”

“I finished my design for the magic mobility stone device. I'm quite proud of this one.”

“Oh? That's exciting. I just hope I can actually add it.”

“This one should work. Come.”

“Okay. Well, see ya, guys.”

The guys all said their see-you-laters and waved me off. Ira clutched the hem of my clothes as she started dragging me along toward her laboratory. She

didn't need to drag me; I was going to accompany her. Maybe this was her own way of hitting on me, and what the guys had said was true?

I wore a puzzled expression as we walked, and Ira shot me a quizzical look of her own. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing," I answered hesitantly.

There was no point in letting it bother me. *Que sera, sera*. The guys had said that the ladies discussed these kinds of things among themselves. It probably wouldn't be that big of a thing out of nowhere. For now, I wouldn't let it bother me. I'd just enjoy the nice relationship we had. Yeah.

Also, I wasn't able to upgrade my workbench using the device Ira made for me. Bummer.

Far to the north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily toiling away, a stout man in ornate, white-and-gold clergyman's clothes was speaking to a man in regular priest's vestments. It was obvious from their ensembles that the rotund man was of much higher standing.

"On what grounds do you accuse me of committing a crime?" asked the first man. "Do you have proof to support your accusation?"

"This is nothing as outrageous as an indictment. I merely heard such a rumor from a parishioner, and I am inquiring as to its validity. If I truly wished to accuse you of wrongdoing, then I would be sending a report back home," the priest declared resolutely, unfaltering before the threatening words of the portly man—the archbishop.

The archbishop furrowed his brows and snorted unhappily at the other man's attitude. The man was a traveling priest—a Nostalgist.

The Nostalgists taught heresy—compassion for demi-humans and the necessity of universal brotherhood to achieve salvation. They preached to the masses that the teachings of the current Church of Adol were wrong. A few years ago, after they discovered someone they claimed was the true saint, they got cocky, claiming that they were carrying out the will of God. They had even caused uprisings among those who sided with the Empire.

“You have no right to criticize me when you lack conclusive evidence. Punishment and imprisonment are required of all sinners. I abide by the teachings of the Church of Adol in all things. All I am doing is disciplining the demi-humans. The idea that I am using the holy soldiers entrusted to me by our virtuous king and the pope for my own self-interest is a baseless rumor, nothing more.”

“However, it does appear that you are moving soldiers and supplies. The facts will become clear to me once I conduct my investigation. How do you plan to explain this?”

“Surely you already know if you’ve been gathering information. Gizmas have swarmed the Great Omitt Badlands. I am mobilizing the soldiers as a countermeasure against them. The troops managed to defeat the first wave. We don’t know if there’ll be a second or third wave, but the soldiers are in position to eradicate the source.”

The traveling priest eyed the archbishop with suspicion. The archbishop didn’t so much as wince. He was enraged that this priest had the nerve to interrogate him, but he didn’t dare show his hand.

Traveling priests were considered untouchables—they traveled the lands of the Holy Kingdom with nothing but the clothes on their backs, thwarting the corruption of the clergy. When it came to status, the archbishop was of a higher position, but he had no right to treat the priest in an overbearing manner.

With a scowl, the priest stared at his opposition long and hard before he eventually gave up and shut his eyes with a shake of his head. “Very well. I shall take you at your word, Your Excellency. God bless you.”

The priest made the X-shaped sign of the radiant cross across his chest and then left the room. The archbishop watched him leave; shortly afterward, he started muttering to himself.

“He’s going to be a nuisance. Should I get rid of him? But if I do that, then...”

As he was busy grumbling, there was the sound of a water droplet splashing somewhere inside the room. However, the archbishop was so engrossed in his soliloquy and speculation that he didn’t notice.

CHARACTERS



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Cui

Chapter 5:

Let's Go on a Rescue Mission!

THREE DAYS AFTER that conversation with the guys, the squads entrusted with liberating the citizens of the Kingdom of Merinard embarked from our frontline base. Each squad was a twelve-person unit. We formed balanced teams of people who knew the terrain, former scouts, excellent fighters, and so on. Everyone was equipped with crossbows. Their objective was to free the people of the villages in the borderlands and gather information. They were to refrain from engaging the Holy Kingdom's army to the best of their ability.

Six squads left the fortress, so the base's population was cut in half all at once. Sir Leonard, Cuvi, Worg, and Indy went with them. Danan, Sykes, and I were on standby.

Things didn't change all that much for those who remained behind. We tended the fields, trained, made new things, scouted the perimeter, and defeated any gizmas we came across. They made good target practice for the ballistae when they came too close. If we hit a sweet spot, they went down in one blow.

I asked if I should join the parties that went out, but...

"We would probably make good progress if we used your powers, but our win would be an irregular case if it involved your exclusive powers. We wouldn't gain any experience on the battlefield," Danan told me.

I half understood what he was getting at.

"Your powers are indeed useful—or rather, highly versatile. However, there are others who can carry out our plan of liberating the people. You should just focus on doing the things only you can do," Sylphy said, apparently picking up on my confusion.

"Hmm, okay. But right now, the only things I have to do are make more bolts, churn out more preserved food, and come up with new items," I replied.

“We want a healthy stockpile of the essentials in an emergency. Our situation’s full of lethal contingencies. In the worst-case scenario, the army the Holy Kingdom has garrisoned in Merinard will come to attack this fortress, and we can never have too many bolts or too much food in that scenario,” Melty pointed out.

“I’m quite sure that your abilities play nicely with alchemy and magical technology. If you could work with me more, we might be able to use them to accelerate our entire community’s technological advancement, not just expand your own repertoire. Our numbers are small even at the best of times. You should focus more on ensuring our technical superiority than fighting on the front lines,” Ira added.

They had a point, but I personally didn’t mind the idea of heading to the forefront.

“I feel bad saying this, but we need you. To put it bluntly, your safety is of even bigger priority than my own. We’re not allowing you out there, no matter how much you want to,” Danan said.

“Hmm, yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

They had some productive capacity here in our frontline base and back in our home base, but my crafting powers were far more effective. I could see how Sylphy and Danan wouldn’t want to risk losing me. I’d feel the same way in their position.

“Because of what you’ve made, the teams that went out are fully equipped. Your job is to have faith in them while you wait and come up with even better things,” Sylphy told me.

“That’s right. Your duty is to protect the place they’ll return to,” Melty said.

They all insisted I should demonstrate my powers from right where I was. So, while our liberation teams were out there fighting, I was to focus on developing new items with Ira, Sykes, and the other craftspeople.

Another day came, as they tend to.

“Are golems easy to make?” I asked in the workshop I had constructed for the craftspeople.

The staff presently available were Ira, who was a former member of the Merinard Order of Mages and knowledgeable on both magic and alchemy, Sykes the alchemist, and other craftspeople who excelled in specialized skills like magic, alchemy, smithing, woodworking, and goldsmithing. Sykes and I were the only men.

“It depends on the golem. What exactly do you intend to use one for?”

“I was just thinking that it’d be more practical if we let golems draw the bowstrings of ballistae and crossbows. I have this image of golems being pretty damn strong, and drawing a bowstring should be a simple enough order to follow, right? Maybe we’d just need ones that only have arms.”

The alchemists oohed at my suggestion.

“It’s innovative,” Ira said. “Normally, golems are mobile human-shaped puppets. Their cores have to have all kinds of operative procedures in place, like making sure they’re balanced for walking and can perceive their surroundings so they don’t crash into anything. But we wouldn’t have to put so much information into the core if all they’re meant to do is turn something or draw a bowstring.”

“We wouldn’t need to use nearly so many materials in making them either. We might be able to get away with using cheap materials if all we need to do is input simple orders. Plus, golems for just that purpose wouldn’t need to be so large.” Sykes was into the positives as well.

“I actually came up with a design that exploits the principle of leverage to help draw a bowstring,” a lamia blacksmith said as she spread out her design across the table.

We all took a look at it. *I see, so the lever would be on the top part of the crossbow—maybe it would be hard to aim? But if I change the shapes of the sight and the lever, maybe I can make it work.*

“This lever crossbow is a good idea. But what about putting a golem mechanism on crossbows that people carry? Think it’s doable?” I asked.

“I don’t think it’d work for infantry-scale crossbows. But it should for ballistae,” Ira said.

“Then perhaps we should try modifying the ballistae and crossbows we already have positioned first?” Sykes suggested.

“I still have a lot of iron and wood, so we won’t have to worry about materials for that. What are golem cores made of?” I asked.

“I think alloys of copper and mithril like the ones we used in the heaters should suffice. Let’s try using enchanted clay and stone for the golem itself,” Ira said.

And so we concluded that the blacksmith and woodworker would improve the crossbows. The mages, alchemists, and goldsmiths would work on our prototype golem autoloader. If the prototypes worked, then I’d start mass production. It was also my job to come up with a variety of new items based on my knowledge of technology from the world I came from and what I knew from games, anime, and manga.

“Kousuke comes up with such interesting ideas. He really does see things differently from the way we do,” Ira said.

“Yeah. And I bet this idea of simplifying golems will lead to all other kinds of applications too,” Sykes said.

“We might even want to stop relying on hydro power and use golem power instead. I guess the problem would be how much magic it takes though, right?”

“Yes, how much magic it takes to make them move is the issue. The node back at our home base gives us an inexhaustible supply, but we don’t have that luxury here,” Ira told me.

“Can’t the operator just supply their own magic? Though I doubt I’d be able to use it that way.”

“That’s an idea. If all the magic does is draw a ballista’s bowstring, then it shouldn’t require much magic. Let’s try to think up a mechanism for absorbing magic as well.” Everyone nodded at Sykes’ proposal and set out to work.

First, I added the golem core element (name TBD) made from spherical mithril

and copper alloys to my crafting menu using item creation, banged out a few using my improved workbench, and handed them over to Ira and the others.

I joined the group of alchemists, including the lamia who had come up with the idea, and we discussed how to modify the improved crossbows. I was useless when it came to magic, but I could be helpful in discussions about mechanical things.

I got some flirtatious vibes from the way the women were looking at me in this group, but I wanted to believe it was just my imagination. It kept feeling like the lamia alchemist was furtively rubbing her tail against my foot, but surely I was just imagining it. And it felt like everyone kept touching me.

I'm just being paranoid, right? I tried to convince myself as I glanced over at Sykes.

A goldsmith and an alchemist each had a firm grip on Sykes's arms, and he was recoiling at how unreasonably close they were leaning into him as they spoke. *Good luck. Hang in there, friend. I think I'll be okay so long as I utter Sylphy's name every once in a while, but I have no way of saving you. I'm so powerless...*

After some talking and testing, we finished the improvements for the crossbows. We improved their rate of fire while maintaining consistent power behind each shot. Since the mechanism was simple, it wasn't liable to break too easily. We made sure that the parts like the lever were sturdily built, so there were no obvious defects.

It was a bit too heavy for me to use, and it wasn't much more useful to me since I had always been able to easily reload using the command action. Well, it's no skin off my nose.

It took a bit longer to wrap up with the ballista golem mechanism. It took about five days for us to whip up a finished prototype. It had an immediate effect, and by combining what we had come up with for regular crossbows, the ballistae had a *blistering* rate of fire now. Furthermore, the improvement came with the added bonus that we only needed one person to man each ballista.

As we spent our days steadily improving our armaments, the first team returned to the fortress. And with them, they brought the latest information on the Kingdom of Merinard.

“Good work out there. Are there any injuries?”

“All twelve of us from the fifth squad are alive and well. Not a single scratch on us.”

“Excellent. Then without further ado, give your report.”

“Yes, sir.”

The first team to return to the fortress comprised its full original complement and 37 people they managed to bring back. We were currently in the strategy operations room, where the commanding officer, Jagheera, and her second-in-command, Zarda—one of the three we rescued the day we met—were giving their report.

“Erm, first things first, infiltrating the kingdom was in itself a difficult task,” Jagheera began.

“Oh? I had a feeling it would be. By the way, you can speak to me like usual. Don’t worry about formalities,” Sylphy said.

“Uh, no, I cannot do that, Your Highness. So, um, there were gizma attacks against the kingdom as well, just as we originally predicted. They have fortified themselves between the border and our fortress in the Great Omitt Badlands.” Jagheera was firm in her refusal to speak casually with Sylphy, trying to sound as polite and professional as she could. Sylphy was the highest-ranking person in their community, and she probably didn’t want to upset the order of things as a civilian in military employ, after all. However, she was clearly unused to speaking that way. “Be that as it may, there is a vast expanse of badland that is connected to the border, so we managed to sneak in under the cover of night.”

Teams paired up, then split their combined twenty-four members into three groups and began their full-scale infiltration from there. They stayed clear of the roads, traveling through the forest, wilderness, and other trackless paths. Jagheera’s squad and Sir Leonard’s squad headed for the villages near the

border. The other two teams were bound for villages a bit deeper afield.

“They had maps, although they’re three years old. They decided on their route advance, and they said they would withdraw immediately if anything unexpected occurred.”

“I see. And what was the state of the village?”

“Well...”

The Holy Kingdom made the Kingdom of Merinard its vassal to obtain its mines, which produce high-quality rock salt, iron, and other minerals. They couldn’t afford to starve the Holy Kingdom soldiers stationed there or the people they were using as laborers; they would be in an internationally precarious situation if they governed in a way that was transparently oppressive.

Because of that, they had taken a certain degree of care in ensuring that the farming villages in the borderlands lived relatively the same way they did before the kingdom had been conquered.

“However, taxes are high and they aren’t free to travel,” Zarda added.

They weren’t allowed to uphold their ancient rituals either, and were forced to convert to the Church of Adol, which worshipped Adol as the one and only god. They were forced into subservient positions to humans, since the Church of Adol’s doctrine was all about human supremacy. As a result, their actual treatment was still inhumane by any reasonable metric.

The villagers’ compliance was maintained by keeping women and children in the army’s custody. The families and friends of those who displayed any defiance were severely punished. It had already resulted in the death of a small child—and this was just the one community we knew details about.

“That’s awful. How did you manage to free them?” I asked.

“We struck under the cover of night. We can see well in the dark, and the soldiers all carry lights when they go on patrol. They made for easy targets.”

“So you didn’t even need to draw your blades.”

Many demi-humans had good night vision. But even if they didn’t, the lights

made the soldiers sitting ducks for their crossbows. We had already demonstrated that the improved crossbows were powerful enough to punch right through their armor.

“After we neutralized the soldiers, we took as much as we could carry, did what we could to make it look like a bandit raid, and booked it straight home.”

“Sir Leonard’s squad followed after the other two teams. They planned to meet up with them to assist.”

“Okay, I understand the situation. If you have anything to report about your equipment or anything else worth mentioning, tell Melty, Ira, or Kousuke,” Sylphy said.

Jagheera and Zarda thought for a moment before speaking up.

“Ah, yes. It was difficult because we couldn’t make a fire. We weren’t able to fill our bellies with something warm,” Jagheera said.

“Yeah, that’s important.”

The quality of food greatly impacted morale. Block cookies were pretty tasty, but one couldn’t subsist on those alone without growing tired of them. We had prepared some jerky using steak I had crafted, but of course people would prefer something hot ‘n’ fresh.

“Also, it would be good to have a way to communicate. Some kind of tool for communicating across a long distance with our allies would be helpful.”

“Oh, a communicator? That’d be preeeeetty hard to make,” I said.

I doubted very many people actually understood how walkie-talkies and cell phones actually worked in modern society. At the very least, I knew squat. I was familiar with the concept of morse code, but I had no idea how the equipment for that sent and received radio waves. I could try to make a transistor radio at the very least, right? But I had never even touched a transceiver before.

“I only know a little bit about that kind of thing, but I’ll try talking with Ira and the others about it.”

With what little knowledge I had, I doubted I’d be able to make a device like what we had back on Earth, so I was hoping that maybe they could finagle

something magical. Besides, I still hadn't gotten to the point of reproducing anything that used electricity, regardless of whether I *had* a grasp of the inner workings of Earth's technology.

Using a magical approach, we were able to create items similar to electronic devices using golem cores, so magic could well be a workable resource. Surely that was the direction I should be taking my inventions from now on.

"Do you have anything else to report?" I asked.

"That's it, unfortunately. We shot all of the enemy soldiers and took no prisoners to make sure we wouldn't be caught. The villagers we freed this time had not been allowed to travel; we don't know anything about the state of things in the kingdom itself. However, according to the people whose job it was to transport crops to the cities, only humans inhabit the towns bigger than villages now. They said they hadn't seen any demi-humans at all."

"Twenty years is a long time. I wonder what happened to the original inhabitants?"

"The villagers believe they were rounded up and sent to develop the borderlands and work in the mines. They'd overheard some soldiers talking about as much."

"I see. Depending on how we look at this, this might actually be a good thing," I said.

"How so?" Sylphy asked.

"You mean because the villages and mines are likely to have worse defenses compared to the cities with their tall walls?" Danan offered.

"I suppose so," Sylphy agreed reluctantly, a pensive look on her face.

That kind of work did have its dangers, to say nothing of what the human supremacists of the Holy Kingdom must be putting them through. I doubted they were working under fair conditions.

"How are the people you freed faring?"

"A few are unwell, but in general, they're all right. At first, they were afraid when we said we would be fleeing to the badlands, but when we easily put

down the gizmas and reached Kousuke's underground shelters before it got dark, they recovered their willpower. The block cookies were also well received. The younger adults and children who had never eaten anything sweet before were especially excited," Jagheera said.

"We have assigned housing to the families and given them food," Zarda added.

"Okay. Today and tomorrow, your team and the people should rest. Then you'll be taking them to our home base."

"Understood."

Jagheera and Zarda withdrew. I sighed once I was sure they were out of earshot.

"Well, I guess that's one win for us," I said.

"It's a tiny step in the grand scheme of things, but a momentous one," Sylphy replied.

Our prospects were grim, but we managed to take one step forward. And in a way, it was a big one.

"That being said, we have two requests from the front lines: The first is warm food that doesn't require fire. The second is a tool for covert communication with our distant allies," I informed Ira and Sykes.

"Hrmm, that won't be easy." Ira folded her arms with a groan, and Sykes did the same.

"We might be able to do something about the warm food, but the communication thing will be a great challenge," he said.

Yeah, I feel you. Even I've got no ideas this time.

"Well, one thing at a time. Any ideas for providing warm food?" I asked.

"Make a small, self-heating portable container?" Ira suggested.

"It's not impossible, but each team has twelve people, right? To make enough food for that many people, wouldn't they need a decently sized pot?" Sykes

asked.

“That’s true. Should we give them a shield that can also be used as a pot?” Ira replied.

“That doesn’t sound like a very elegant solution. Well, I guess we can try to come up with something in that vein, though. How should the container heat up?”

“It’ll work if the person using it can use their own magic or a magic stone.”

“Also, I think it’ll be best if we make sure it comes out sturdy and lightweight,” I said.

Thus, we decided to tackle the warm food problem first and try developing a shield that could also be used as a portable container slash self-heating pot.

“Do you have any ideas for this?” Ira asked me.

“Hmm, I think we had a method of heating up food using water and quicklime. But I don’t think I have any ideas for making a container or anything like that.”

“Quicklime, you say? It’s true that it heats up rapidly,” Sykes said.

“How interesting. Did people back from your world cook using quicklime, then?” Ira asked.

“Nah, it wasn’t commonplace. Allegedly, our people used it in circumstances where we couldn’t use fire. I’m pretty sure it’s only used in special situations like on a vehicle or during a disaster when it’s hard to cook. And of course, I think it was also used by soldiers when they were being mobilized for military operations so they could eat warm meals.” Naturally, I had no idea if they’d *actually* used quicklime or not. “Still, they’d be one-time use. It’d weigh people down if they had to carry a bunch.”

“Putting aside the question of whether we should use it, it might be a good idea to try multiple renditions,” Ira said.

“That’s true,” Sykes agreed. “We might come up with a different kind of technology that could be applied while we’re working on it.”

“You think so? I s’pose I can see that,” I said.

The effort certainly wouldn't go to waste. At present, it would be best if we did whatever we could here behind the front lines.

"Next, a way to communicate," Ira said.

"That's a tough one. Kousuke, you got anything that might help here?" Sykes asked.

"Back on Earth we had a couple of different technical solutions that made this kind of a non-issue, but I have very little idea of how they actually worked. But if you think it'll help, I can tell you about it," I warned before telling them about the history of telecommunications as I knew it. "I think the simplest of them is morse code."

"What's that?"

"It's a system where you kinda go dit, dah, dit, dah. You can communicate across long distances using short sounds and long sounds to create a simple code."

I tapped the desk with my fingertips to explain the general idea. However, I didn't know that much about it, so that was the most I could tell them about it.

"Imagine it's like, the dit part is magic flowing for just an instant, and then the dah, is it continuously flowing. Back in my world, we used electricity, but it's probably easier for you guys to understand magic, right? You know, like that barrier device we've got for our headquarters. That thing chases monsters away by periodically emitting magical waves. We should make magical waves travel long distances, and they can transmit messages via wavelengths. Frankly, it'd be much simpler if we could find ways to make those waves carry voices."

After hearing that, Ira, Sykes, and the other mages and alchemists started whispering among themselves.

"If we're just sending waves, then we can adjust the wavelengths..."

"We could make a receiver by using detection magic..."

"Using golem cores, we could..."

There was much animated discussion. Why was I being excluded? At least, that was the vibe I was getting, so I decided to join the blacksmiths,

woodworkers, and goldsmiths to work on the design for the shield-pot. *It'll be heavy, but maybe something like a wok wouldn't be bad for the basic shape? We can give them a cover slash handle that can be attached and removed so that the inside of the pot won't get dirty, and maybe a locking mechanism so that the cover can be affixed and used as a handle for the pot.*

While we were in the middle of our discussion, the mages and alchemists finished theirs.

“I think we'll be able to manage it so long as we apply golem technology. We're going to start developing it, including coming up with a code.”

“Oh, that so? You gonna get started right away, then? I think we're about done coming up with the design for our pot too. Now we need to work on a prototype.”

Just like that, development for the pot-shield and portable heating vessels, quick lime heating bags, and what we were calling the golem communicators began.

While we'd settled on a plan of action, I really didn't have a role in development. My job was to come up with ideas, supply materials that would be too big a pain to procure or make with the team's own power, craft the first production models, and find out whether they could be added to my crafting menu.

As for the latter, I'd discovered through experimentation that I couldn't add items with a major flaw to my crafting menu using item creation. Which meant that I could determine whether a new product was better than standard if I was able to add it to my crafting menu.

Once I figured that out, I earned a position as resident Quality Assurance specialist. I couldn't help but think of all the haggard, overworked engineers back home who would give their left nut for my powers.

But anyway, back to the story. Now that I was done dishing out ideas, I had nothing to do for the time being and lots of free time on my hands. Sometimes, the team came to me for my opinion during development, but like I mentioned,

the artisans were the ones doing the actual work. It went without saying that it would be much faster if I did it via item creation. Overwhelmingly so. And there wouldn't be any flaws either. However, making me do everything came with its own set of problems.

I decided not to get involved when it came to the Kingdom of Merinard Liberation Army's (as we'd decided to dub ourselves recently) equipment.

Therefore, I only used item creation for things Sylphy and I would personally use, things that I was asked to make, or things that would be difficult to create without it—like bullets, for example.

The blacksmiths back at our home base were making the bolts for crossbows and ballistae. Other people were handling the growing of the food and milling, along with the actual weapon-making. It took them quite a bit of effort to make the vital steel plate springs for improved crossbows, though.

I'm still rambling and dancing around the story, aren't I? Why am I doing that? Look, I know. I admit it. I'm trying to escape from reality. I will gladly admit as much.

Huh? Why was I doing that? Well, you see...

"Why the hell is there a human here?!"

"I knew this was all too good to be true! Why the hell did you bring us all here?!"

"Waaah! Waaah!"

"It's okay, sweetie. Daddy's right here. We'll protect you."

It was pandemonium. I mean, it made sense. They all assumed I was a human from the Holy Kingdom, right? *Take a closer look, folks. I'm wearing elven garments. Don't I seem more elf-like than I would without 'em? Oh, I don't? You're not buying it? Welp.*

"What's everyone yelling about? Oh, Kousuke? What's going on here?" Just as I was feeling backed against a wall, a lupine Liberation Army soldier in leather armor with a crossbow and sword came over to talk to me. I didn't know her

name, but she must have been from the fifth squad.

“Well, y’know, I’m a human, right? They think I’m from the Holy Kingdom,” I explained.

“Ooh, I see. Guys, calm down. This man’s name is Kousuke; he’s our ally. He’s not from the Holy Kingdom—he’s the Fabled Visitor from another world. He built this amazing fortress, its walls, the lodging houses, the fields, and our weapons all by himself.”

“I didn’t do this *all* by myself. You all helped me procure the materials.”

“You’re so modest. Oh, by the way, he’s also Princess Sylphyel’s lover—or I guess I should say her spouse. He’s given us all food, weapons, a means to fight, and safe bases, so you don’t need to worry about him. He is personable, humble, kind, and very friendly.”

“I am so not deserving of all that praise. I’m not *that* good of a person.” I tried to laugh it off, but she wasn’t budging. Really, though, I really wasn’t some kind of perfect, super saintly person or anything. At the end of the day, I only did any of this stuff out of affection for one woman.

However, the escapees accepted her explanation, and while they didn’t completely let down their guard around me, they at least dropped the outward hostilities. That was solved for now.

“Um, yeah. As you heard, my name is Kousuke. I’m not from the Holy Kingdom; as she said, I’m not even from this world to begin with. The Church of Adol can eat shit for all I care, so let’s be nice to one another.”

The escapees stirred at my vulgar language. *Okay, I think I made my point clear.*

“Putting that all aside, are any of you injured or sick? I’ll also examine anyone who has any old injuries or bad legs or arms. I won’t ask for any payment because we’re acquaintances now. Instead, I’d like you to do your part pitching in once you’re feeling better,” I said.

“Kousuke’s treatments really work. My foot was badly injured after crossing the badlands three years ago, and I had had a limp ever since, but Kousuke healed it in the blink of an eye,” the wolf beastfolk said.

Ooh, so she was one of the ones whose feet I healed using the incredible power of my splints. I see, so that's why she's praising me so much. Now I kinda get it.

Because of her enthusiastic encouragement, the people who had been freed from the kingdom stepped forward with their problems one by one. I retrieved and set down some chairs and hammock stands from my inventory, cobbling together a field hospital of sorts.

"What's with the white clothes?"

"Don't all doctors wear these kinds of white coats?"

"They do?"

Apparently, doctors didn't have the same kind of uniform in this world.

Oh, well. I sat in a chair and guided my first patient into the chair across from me. This child seemed to have caught a cold.

"Maybe it's because he's tired from walking or because of the change in environment. Either way, here, try this panacea and this small life potion." I took out a bottle filled with golden liquid and a smaller bottle of red liquid and handed it over to his mom. "Have him gulp these down. Don't worry, they come with the seal of approval from an alchemist and member of the former Order of Mages. They're completely safe."

His mother was baffled by me suddenly handing over expensive-looking medicines, but she started making her child drink them anyway. The panacea tasted like black tea, and the life potion was sour. Not very tasty. The child made a face after drinking them. *I totally understand, kid.*

"Oh... For some reason, I feel warm." Vitality returned to the child's previously pallid complexion, and his eyes looked livelier too.

"That means it's working. Now, get as much rest as you can, and be sure to eat lots of food. Also, it might be best if you don't bathe in the cold water tonight. Just wipe your body down with a warm, damp towel. Don't get chilly, but you gotta get clean."

"Okay!"

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” The boy’s mother had tears in her eyes as she bowed to me several times. I hadn’t seen any advanced medical care in this world, so it wasn’t so unusual for a simple cold to turn fatal for children.

After seeing my first patient’s positive reaction, the other people who had come to watch started asking to be treated.

“If there’s anyone in pain, please feel free to lie down on the hammocks while you wait,” I said.

I treated them one after the other. The fifth squad had done a flawless job escorting them; no one had been injured while on the move. But overall, they seemed malnourished, and a lot of them had weak constitutions as a result.

While I administered antidotes, I also handed out life potions to those who didn’t have much stamina left. Nearly all of them were recovered afterward.

There was also someone who had an injured foot, so I healed them using a splint.

“Whoooa! My foot! My foot’s healed! Thank you, Doctor!”

“Ha ha ha. I’m hardly deserving of the title. My treatments are practically cheating, so don’t go around to actual doctors demanding the same level of treatment.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve never heard of a miracle cure like this before. I hear that the magic potions that alchemists make work pretty well, but they’re too expensive.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

I had seen how alchemists made potions, and it seemed like a ton of work. I had no idea what it was like to use magic, but from watching them, I could see that the task involved a tremendous amount of concentration. There was also a lot of labor involved, like boiling herbs, smashing them, and extracting liquid medicines.

I could totally understand why Ira got peevish when I was able to make the highest levels of recovery potions with about as much effort as popping the materials in a microwave and pressing the start button. I felt really bad about it.

“Is that everybody? If anyone else feels unwell, please let me know before you leave. And make sure you all eat, get enough rest, and cooperate with one another. That’s all from me for now, then. Dismissed,” I said.

I said, dismissed! Hey, don’t you all start clinging to me! Oh, but it’s not so bad having these cute kids with their cat ears and dog ears clinging to me. Hee hee hee. You keep that up and I’m gonna start petting your ears. You’re gonna dig my petting skills!

“Phew, I’m beat.”

After I was done treating everyone, I played tag and hide-and-seek with the kids. It was nice to play like a kid again. But they’re pretty gifted with their physical abilities. They were super fast and really tough.

Also, it was unfair that they could follow scents for hide-and-seek. They’d find me right away no matter where I hid, which left me bewildered, and then I was astonished when someone told me that I needed to hide my scent or else I’d never win. Those kids were all gonna grow up to be hunters, I just knew it...

“The kids all have lots of energy, huh?” Sylphy chuckled with amusement when she noticed me slouching over the table. Her natural smile was so much prettier than that confident smirk. I was totally gonna gobble her up tonight. Mwa ha ha.

“Seems like things were rough for them. The kids look all right, but the adults were pretty thin,” I commented.

“Yeah, I noticed that too. But they should be fine now that they’re with us. With enough food, they should be able to recover their strength.”

“There were lots of men among them too. Though I doubt Sykes’ll be off the hook anytime soon.”

Among the liberated citizens, there were even single men. They would be sent to our home base to recover first, so the number of men on the front lines wasn’t about to change just yet.

“Not enough men to go around... Well, it is a pretty serious problem.” Sylphy

forced a smile at that.

The ratio of men to women was 1:20 among the 300 people who had once been citizens of the Kingdom of Merinard; one man could take multiple wives, but it was still a difficult situation. It would be nice if we could round up even more.

“Are you...”

“Hmm?”

“Are you interested in any of the other women?” Sylphy said, refusing to meet my gaze.

She seemed to be asking in earnest, so I decided to give her an honest answer. “Ira’s cute and Melty is pretty. Pirna and the other harpies have been sending signals my way, and Gerda makes me feel all warm and fuzzy and calm.”

“What about Shemel and Jagheera?”

“I don’t think they’re interested in me like a woman would be in a man.” I got the feeling that they just saw me as a friend or just as someone entertaining. “Everyone’s really cute or pretty, but you’re the one that I love. I’d be lying if I said I have zero attraction to anyone else, but I think you’re the prettiest of them all, and I only want you.”

If I had met any of the others first, then I might have had a different fate. I didn’t know what the future might hold, but at the very least, I didn’t think now was the time for me to get involved with all of them.

“But I’m not very feminine. And I’m not charming either.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Are you serious? If Ira and Melty heard you talking about yourself that way, I bet they’d flip.”

“Y-you think so?”

Ira was petite and flat as a board. Melty’s body rivaled Sylphy’s, but she

scared the bejeezus out of me. I might feel differently if I hung out with her more, though.

But Sylphy had an amazing figure that was just my type, she was good at cooking, her real personality when she wasn't putting on her ice queen act was utterly adorable—she was flawless. It was a plus that I could depend on her so much. I wasn't sure what that said about me as a man. But still!

“I guess you're just not aware of it. Very well then, I'll prove just how charming you are.”

“Wh-what are you—? S-stop! Kousuke, don't!”

“Mwa ha ha. When I'm through with you, you won't be thinking those things about yourself any longer.”

I attacked her like some kind of wild animal. Sylphy resisted, but I accomplished what I had to do by coaxing her, telling her again and again just how beautiful I thought she was, and hardening my heart enough to ignore her begging through her tears for help.

“See how pretty you look? Now let's go show everybody!”

“No way! Absolutely not! I'd rather die than let everyone see me looking like this!”

I had dressed Sylphy in a frilly black gothic lolita dress, which Sylphy rejected, shaking her head the whole time I dragged her along. She was utterly adorable. And yet she was strong, so I wasn't afraid of dragging her like this.

“Melty! Meltyyy!” I called in a loud voice for her.

“What?! Don't shout for her!” Sylphy protested.

Melty popped up soon enough. A menacing grin spread across her face. It was frightening!

“Oh my, what have we here? My, my, you look lovely, Sylphyel. So lovely that everyone should get the opportunity to see.”

“Nooo!”

Melty easily dragged the protesting Sylphy outside with her. I was in awe of

her power. What did it mean that Melty was able to easily drag Sylphy with her Herculean strength? That Melty was the strongest, just as I feared?

After that, Melty brought Sylphy out into the square, and everyone in the base gathered to shower her with praise of how pretty and beautiful she looked in her gothic lolita ensemble, which resulted in her shutting everyone out and hiding in her room for a while.

Around dinnertime, she finally came out of her room. So cute.

The truth that I had been the one to make that cute and innovative (to the people of this world) garment became publicized. Whoops. That had been an incredibly stupid move, knowing what I did about the gender ratio here.

“Um, I’m not a clothing store.”

“Just give up already. Just think of this as your punishment for abusing our princess by making her wear such cute clothing.”

“But it’s not fair.”

Day after day spent warding this rustic fortress from the gizmas and Holy Kingdom with weapons in hand or making new tools, ammunition, or food had stolen the women’s charm. The charm of *couture*, that is.

These were times of war, in a sense. We weren’t allowed luxuries. Although we could bathe every day in cold water, everyone had pretty much the same clothes and the same equipment. We didn’t even distinguish between men and women; it was all made of leather, iron, and coarse, sturdy linen. It went without saying that we didn’t have any cosmetics; out here in the badlands, we couldn’t even procure nice-smelling flowers.

And here I had gone and put Sylphy in that dress. A dress made of soft cloth with an abundance of cute frills and lace. And with that, the women who had all been fawning over Sylphy all stared at me for a time with this incredible look in their eyes.

Their eyes were shining. I could almost hear a sparkly little sound effect. *Where in the world did she get that dress?* they asked me with their eyes. *Was it*

you?! You made it, didn't you?!

I tried to escape, but they took a roundabout path, grabbed me by the shoulders, and dragged me into the conference room. Ever since, I had been making all kinds of clothes, one after the other.

They made me craft all kinds of things: Sylphy's dress in different colorways, dresses with unique designs, comfy-soft garments in every style, and even undergarments. I had gathered so many leaves and fibers that I would probably never run out, so I didn't lack for materials.

But I couldn't just keep quiet. This wasn't a healthy relationship. I was being ordered to make things and then just hand them over. I realized it might be bad to be overly greedy considering my powers and position, but wasn't I allowed some kind of compensation?

The ladies discussed my complaints at length before they approved.

"Very well. I'll go ahead and..."

"Why are you taking your clothes off?! That's not the kind of compensation I want!"

"Tch."

Did Melty really just click her tongue at me? She might actually be trying to bed me.

"Then what kind of compensation do you desire? It's not like we have anything we can give you. Everything we've been producing here are all things you can already make. It's not like we have any money."

"I know. Though, I won't say that your idea of compensation isn't tempting. But I think it's kinda weird to demand your bodies as payment for nice clothes. What I want concerns Sylphy."

"What do you mean?" Melty and the other ladies gave me puzzled looks.

"Sylphy's not all that enthusiastic about this kinda thing, right? Dressing up and wearing cute clothes."

"That's right."

“So. I’m going to be giving you all clothes. In return, I want your help getting Sylphy to wear the clothes that I make. I want to see her in all kinds of cosplay!” I clenched my fist and emphasized just how much I wanted this.

I mean, she was an elf! As a guy who’d dabbled in fantasy stories before, of course I’d fantasized about elves. And she was a dark elf at that. It was only natural that I wanted to see what she looked like in different costumes.

Ira, who happened to be in a corner of the conference room, locked her eye on me as her lids narrowed in a show of transparent disgust. “Wow, you sound like a desperate perv.”

“Hrngh!” Her comment was like a dagger straight to the heart.

“I cannot disparage your desire to see our princess looking pretty,” said Melty. “By the way, Kousuke, do you know the story of Sycle and Zephyr?”

“Uugh... No, I don’t.”

“Well, the story goes...” Melty began to tell me a story of the gods of the sun and the northern wind, whose names were Sycle and Zephyr respectively.

“Okay. So what are you getting at with all of this?” I asked.

“It’s unreasonable to expect me to force her to dress up like you made her yesterday. She’ll just get even more stubborn if we push her too hard.”

“Maybe it might be unreasonable, but we don’t know that she’d react that way for sure. So?”

“What I’m trying to say is, perhaps by making us lots of clothes that look like they’re from another world, you’ll make her jealous and she’ll want to wear them herself.”

“You don’t think she’ll just pout about it?”

“No, I don’t. As someone who has known her a long time, I am sure this plan will work.”

“Hmm, well, in that case...”

I wasn’t entirely against the plan, but I wasn’t entirely for it either. It sounded like a much more peaceful solution than ripping Sylphy’s clothes off and forcing

her into new duds, though. *I guess I'll go along with it and see how it goes. Melty's physique and shape are similar to Sylphy's, so I wouldn't be wanting for something nice to look at, at least. Hmm, maybe I'll make one of those, one of these, and one of those...*

I was completely absorbed in thoughts of fashion when someone pulled on the hem of my shirt. I looked to see who it was and found a huge, slightly dewy eye gazing up at me.

"Me too," Ira said.

"Hm?"

"I want to wear different outfits too. I shall help you lure in Her Highness."

"O-okay, thanks." Ira looked so determined that I couldn't help but nod.

I have a feeling that Ira's going to be better suited to a very different wardrobe than what I have in mind for Sylphy and Melty, but if she wants to experiment, why not? She's cute, so I'm sure she'll look good in anything.

And so I came up with all kinds of otherworld garments. From where I stood, they were more familiar than what people wore here, but I had to admit they were more like cosplay than not.

"For some reason, this outfit makes me feel tense," Melty said.

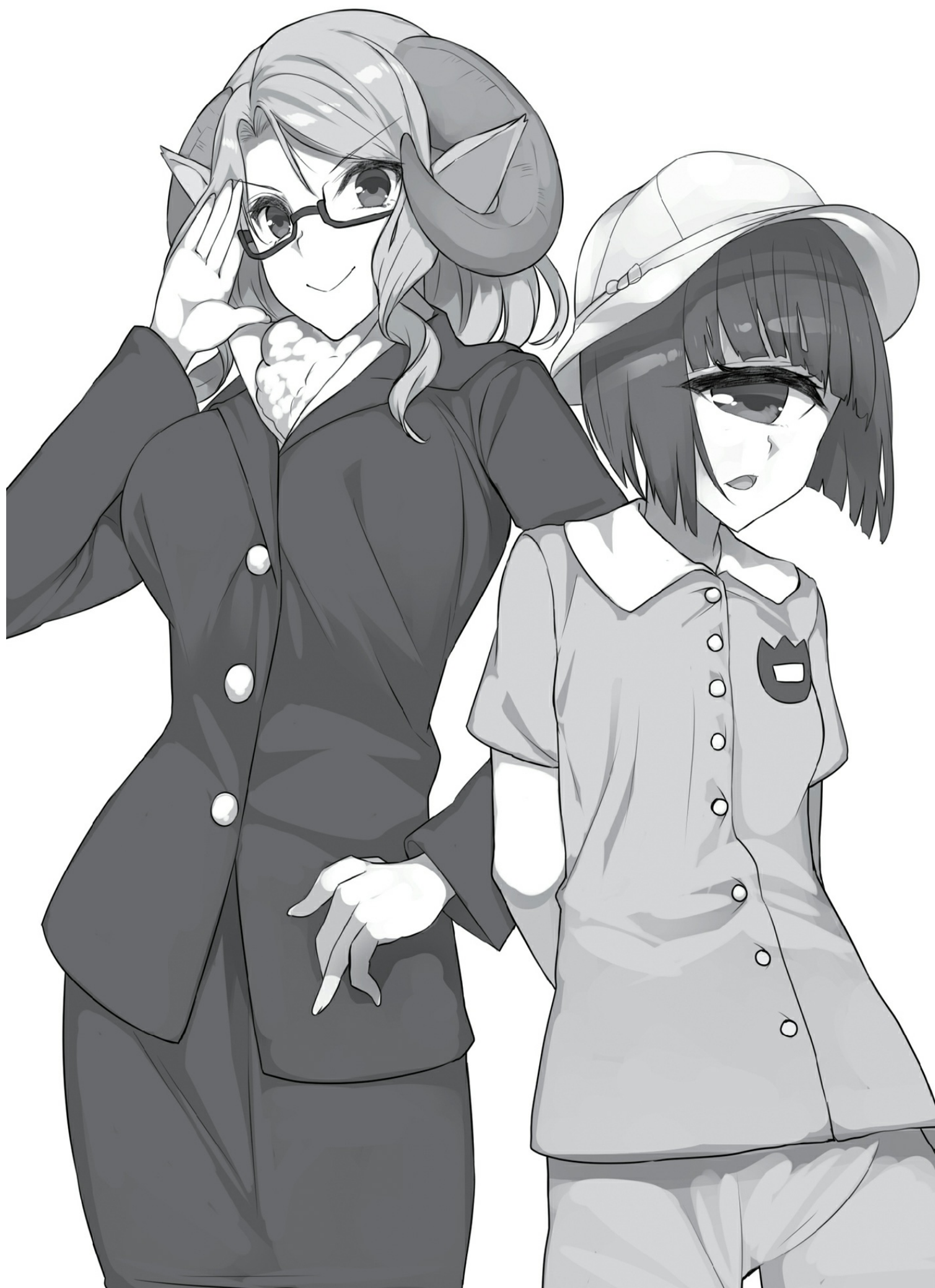
"Maybe it's giving you a buff to your business or educational skills," I offered.

For Melty, I made something like a formal suit for interviews. I gave her fashionable fake glasses, which made her look like a competent businesswoman, or maybe a teacher? The outfit would've looked perfect with black stockings, but unfortunately, I couldn't make any.

"I get the feeling that my clothes are different," Ira trailed off.

"N-nah, you look great."

Meanwhile, Ira was wearing a blue smock, a pink skirt, and a yellow hat—she was the very image of a kindergartener. With her bobbed hairdo and her tiny physique, it looked great on her and made me feel awfully skeevy.



“This is obviously an outfit for children. I wanted something I could actually wear.”

“Okay, okay, calm down. I’m sorry.” I decided to make her something else since she was stomping toward me with a glare.

“Th-this is for me?”

“Yes. C’mon, hurry!”

“Nngh...”

Ira faltered at the over-the-top pink outfit I came up with next and went to go change. Someone tapped on my shoulder a few times.

“Don’t move your head, but look out the window. Just a glance,” Melty told me.

“Hmm?” I did as she said and glanced out the window, where I spotted Sylphy peering inside. She was wearing this adorably envious look on her face.

“We’ve almost got her. You should go ahead and make another outfit for me. I don’t mind if it’s a bit sexier.”

“I was saving those kinds of outfits for Sylphy.”

“Tch.”

Did she really just click her tongue again?! To be honest, I thought that this suit and tight skirt in her bare legs was already quite sexy, but I went ahead and made her another new outfit. This one was a dirndl, a traditional dress from Europe. I was sure it’d look good on her body.

“I’m off to get changed, then.” Melty cheerfully headed off into the changing room with the dirndl in hand.

I started spontaneously handing out outfits to the other girls. The most popular ones were the idol-like outfit I’d given a harpy and the shrine maiden garments I had handed to an ogre. The lizardfolk ladies looked good in the cowboy and cowgirl costumes that I gave them. They also looked good in knightly attire, so maybe their kind could pull off any cool outfit.

The lamias looked great in whatever I gave them, but I was pretty strapped

for ideas when it came to bottoms. They were fans of the Arabian dancer costume and the sexier outfits that showed off lots of skin. Maybe it was a racial preference; I'd observed a pretty consistent exhibitionist streak in their previous dress.

"I'm done changing." Ira came back from the next room over, which was now being used as a changing room.

"Bravo." I clapped, which made Ira blush and fidget bashfully.

Ira was wearing a frilly pink dress that looked like something a magical girl would wear. I also gave her a cute wand to match, which she actually hung on to. As it so happened, I had made that wand out of mithril, so it was usable. At least, I was pretty sure it was.

Melty came out next wearing the dirndl. "Ta-da! What do you think? This dress is quite comfortable."

Just as you'd imagine... Her chest. Was. Incredible. A feast for the eyes, in fact. I reflexively pressed my hands together in reverence to her breasts.

And then it happened.

"Kousuke, you look like you're really enjoying yourself here." Sylphy stormed into the conference room slash fashion runway. From the way her cheek was twitching, she must not have been able to endure it any longer.

You fell for it, fool!

I was sure everyone here thought the same thing. The ladies in the room acted swiftly. I took out the clothes I wanted Sylphy to wear from my inventory while the women showed Sylphy inside and blocked the exit.

"We've been waiting for you, Sylphy! We knew you'd want to join us!"

"He has a lot of clothing he would like you to wear. Since you're here, you should see how they look!"

Sylphy realized then that she'd been had, but it was too late. She had nowhere to run; even the windows had been blocked. "You dare betray me?"

"I have no idea what you're referring to, Your Highness. Look, everyone is wearing otherworldly clothes. You have nothing to be afraid of."

“Nngh...” Knowing she had nowhere to run, Sylphy gave up and was dragged away to the changing room. And now, she was my—well, *their* dress-up doll.

“Since you’re so pretty, you should wear more outfits that accentuate that beauty. You can’t keep strutting about in leather combat gear all day!” Melty scolded Sylphy.

“But I’m supposed to lead you all. It’d be crazy if I wore extravagant clothes all the time.”

“You’ve got Kousuke now, so you don’t need to worry about such things anymore. If anything, you need to dress yourself up more for him.”

“Y-you think so?”

Go, Melty. You tell her.

Finally convinced, Sylphy tried on all kinds of outfits. She looked *good* in that ribbed sweater. Every piece really showed off her curves and... Mwe hee hee.

The fashion fiasco had put the development of new tools on hold, but everyone was so jazzed afterward that all I received was a weak rebuttal.

“I can’t even lecture you. Morale’s never been higher,” Danan said listlessly.

“Sorry ’bout that.”

Still, this wasn’t really the time to be getting excited over clothes. The fact that a squad had returned meant that more would likely be coming back with more rescued civilians before long. We had no idea how many would be coming, so we couldn’t be too prepared.

Days passed, and just as the enthusiasm from our sartorial escapade began to subside a little, an express messenger arrived at the gates. It was Pirna, who should have been acting as the scout for the first squad.

“The first, second, and sixth squads launched an attack on the Bynysk rock salt mines and have taken control over their defensive unit. We liberated the captive workers and their families, totaling approximately 800 people. They are on their way to the badlands now, but we don’t have nearly enough food, water, or other supplies.”

“Ooh boy.” I reflexively looked up at the sky upon hearing the report. I was sure that Sir Leonard and Shemel were behind this careless scheme. It must’ve been them.

“What’s their action agenda?” Sylphy asked.

“They said that they would liberate all of the villages between the Bynysk Mines and the badlands and resupply from the villages’ crop stores as they make their way here. They expect to arrive at the shelter closest to the border in about one week.”

“Basically, their numbers are going to keep increasing. We won’t be able to make it in time using normal methods.” Sylphy glanced at me.

Yeah, I know. There’ll be no other way to pull this off otherwise.

“We’ll need to start moving supplies from our home base. I’ll put as many supplies in my inventory as I can without spreading us too thin here. I’ll grab the supplies we left at the underground shelters along the way and make a field to be harvested at the shelter nearest to here. I think that’ll do it.”

“Yeah, it would be bad if we made Kousuke go all the way to the border. He should stay at the shelter closest to the border and help them out when they arrive. They’re just going to have to figure out things on their own until then,” Sylphy said.

I had only anticipated the underground shelters accommodating one frontier village’s worth of people—about fifty—at a time. Needing to house and feed eight hundred people went completely beyond my estimate.

“This is way more than I planned for. I’m sure they had a good reason, but it’s gonna be difficult for us to deal with.”

“There’s no point in whining about it now. Your Highness, I shall be here to wait for their arrival,” Danan said.

“Okay, please do. Pirna, go relay what we just discussed to the liberation squads. But don’t push yourself too hard. The last thing we want is for you to crash and never deliver the message.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Pirna gave a salute with her wings and then flew

outside. Harpies were overwhelmingly faster in the air than anyone on foot. No one could match her speed in scouting and delivering messages.

“Do you think they’re being pursued?” I asked.

“Most likely. They’ll need a way to shake them off.”

“There’re multiple ways to go about it, but what should we go with?”

I headed to the storehouse where we kept our supply reserves while I mulled over our options.

Well, no matter what we wind up doing, we’ll knock them down. Yeah. We’ll have to attack at range if we’re going to take out force that has us beat for raw headcount.

Far to the north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busy making their plans, a stout man was listening to a nimble-looking fellow dressed in leather armor inside a castle. It was obvious from the rotund man’s white robes and golden embroidery that he bore a high position within the clergy.

“There’s been a revolt at the Bynysk rock salt mines?”

“So I have heard, Your Excellency. The units in the vicinity thought it strange when the messenger didn’t arrive to give their regular report. When they went to check on the situation, they found it completely deserted. They reported that the soldiers who had been stationed there had all been slaughtered.”

“Hmm...”

The same thing had happened at one of the frontier villages relatively close to the Bynysk Mines just the other day. Those base demi-humans intend to rise up against me yet again? Did my going easy on them in an effort to accumulate some good karma in this life backfire? I guess they’ll need whips and iron to learn their lesson after all.

“What are you doing to handle this?”

“We extracted military forces from the neighboring towns to pursue them with. They are nothing more than a ragtag mob with no equipment so to speak

of, so we should be able to rout them.”

“I would hope so. However, tell the troops to try their best not to kill them for the time being.”

We can't put them to work if they're dead, after all. And it would cost us precious time and money to get more. But what curious timing for this to all happen just as I was beginning to assemble my troops at the southern border. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

The archbishop sank into thought as he watched the messenger salute and take his leave. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the sound of a droplet of water splashing in a corner of his office.

CHARACTERS



レオナルド

Leonard

Chapter 6:

Let's Counterattack!

WE ACTED SWIFTLY.

Once I had stuffed my inventory with enough supplies and potentially useful tools, I took off running at full speed toward our frontline shelter with Sylphy and five harpies in tow. We left the harpies in charge of patrolling for gizmas and ran so fast, it would be impossible for a standard march. Sylphy had always possessed demon-like stamina, so I combined command actions and my own muscle power to put your average marathon runner to shame, only exerting myself as much as I would just jogging.

We did run into gizmas along the way, though.

“Ain’t nobody got time for gizmas.” I put down the nearest gizma with three slugs from my pump-action. It only took an instant to put it back into my inventory.

“Huh, you actually are pretty efficient on the battlefield.”

“So long as I’ve got my arsenal.”

I reloaded the gun as we set off again. The first day, we passed the first and second shelters and made camp at the third one. Originally, we had anticipated people moving between one shelter a day, so clearly we were breaking our own logistics over our knee.

“Bath, food, sleep, and then we’ll go.”

“Bath?”

I ignored the confused looks from Sylphy and the harpies and made a bathtub out of brick blocks. It was about as big as the infinite fountainhead. Basically, two meters by two meters. It was about 55 centimeters deep—good enough for a temporary bathtub.

“Now let’s get some hot water in here.”

The passage of time was almost nonexistent inside my inventory. I had plenty of pots full of boiling water in it. I had originally been planning to dump these on the heads of our enemies, not use them for making baths.

“Now to adjust the temperature.” I didn’t use the command actions for this; I just poured the cold water in by hand like normal. *Yeah, this should about do it.* “Ready! We can take turns soaking in the tub.”

“What’s this? Hot water?”

“Wait, don’t tell me you guys don’t have a bathing culture?”

Now that I thought about it, the default thing to do here was wipe down your body using a wet cloth. I gave a brief explanation about bathtubs, handed everyone towels, and told them all to take turns hopping in. While they were busy with that, I got dinner ready.

“Ooh, bathtubs are such a luxury.”

“I had no idea soaking in hot water like this felt so good.”

“Yeah, I like this. Definitely too rich for my blood, though. It’d probably be hard to prepare hot water like this every day.”

I had my back to the harpies and Sylphy as they commented; I focused solely on the food. *The harpies aren’t very dexterous, so it’s probably best to make something that doesn’t call for any utensils. Hamburgers and salad sandwiches oughta cut it.*

It was inevitable that I’d catch a tiny peek of them in the bathtub while I was preparing our meal. Maybe it was because they were all women, or maybe it was because of their own culture in this world, but they didn’t seem to mind being seen naked all that much.

Well, since it was a temporary bathtub, it wasn’t like I had made a partition or anything! Okay?!

While I surreptitiously enjoyed the delicious spectacle, I added more hot water to the tub and I had my turn after the harpies and Sylphy got out one at a time, then offered them their meal. It had gotten a bit lukewarm, so I added more hot water.

Oh, their feathers are floating in the water. Hmm, they're awfully pretty. The color of their plumage varied quite a bit from person to person. Pirna's was a bluish color, and the harpies I was traveling with now sported shades of pink, orange, emerald, tawny, and jet black respectively. *This one here's emerald, so that must be one of Fronte's.*

The pink harpy was Belon, the orange one was Fitch, the tawny one was Flamé, and the jet-black one was Rei. Thrilled to shed their "turd birds" moniker, they'd fawned all over me upon seeing the powerful aerial bombs.

Hmm, Fronte's feathers are actually quite pretty now that I see them up close. It felt nice as I glided my fingers along it, and I found it quite pliable. There was something cool about bird feathers. Maybe it was because of the simplicity and elegance of their design.

I took my time relaxing my abused legs in the warm water and got out when I felt thoroughly warmed up. It went without saying that I was naked; I could feel them all watching me. *Hey now, the last thing you wanna see when you're in the middle of eating is a naked man, right?*

Not to mention, while I had put on a little muscle since I came to this world, I wasn't actually muscular at all. I doubted I was anything worth looking at.

"Huh? You've got a feather." Rei noticed Fronte's feather in my hand when I walked over to the table after getting dressed. Everyone was staring at it now.

"Wah?! Um, hey! Just throw that away, okay?!" Fronte's face was bright red as she flapped her wings. It was actually pretty cute.

"Oh, I just grabbed it since I thought it was pretty. I just think feathers are nice to look at," I said as I ran my finger through the feather again, which caused her to hide her blushing face behind her wings and avert her eyes.

"Eeeek..."

Looking around the room, I noticed the other harpies were also blushing and acting nervous. *Huh? Did I do something I shouldn't have?*

"Sylphy, did I just do something weird?"

"Kousuke," she replied, "how would *you* feel if one of us fiddled with a strand

of your hair with a mesmerized look while saying how pretty it was?”

“Ooh...” I’d either feel grossed out or really embarrassed. If someone of the opposite sex were to pick up one of my fallen curled hairs and start fiddling with it with a grin on their face... Yikes, that would make me feel awfully uncomfortable. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“I-It’s okay. If you like it, then, uh...” Fronte’s face was still red as she trailed off, but she laughed as she shook her wings at me.

Uh, what should I do? About the feather? I guess I should just give it back to her.

“T-take good care of that, okay?”

“Oh, all right.”

She wound up giving it to me, so I decided to put it in my inventory. Its registered name was Fronte’s Feather. *Ooh, it’s being given the unique item treatment? It’s even being treated as a proper noun.*

“Um, you can have mine too.”

“And mine if you’d like.”

“H-here.”

“Here ya go.”

For some reason, I wound up receiving a feather from each of the other harpies too, and soon I held a rainbow of them in my hand. *Hmm, these are kinda like treasures. They’re so pretty.* When I was a kid, I’d always felt like I had found a treasure when I stumbled across bird feathers. Crow feathers were actually quite pretty when you looked them over closely.

“Kousuke, your eyes are sparkling.”

“Huh? They are? I was just remembering how I used to keep bird feathers in a treasure box when I was kid. It’s kinda nostalgic, even though we don’t have anything like you back home. I hardly ever saw birds where I lived, so it wasn’t very often that I got to touch one.” While I didn’t grow up in a place with lots of nature, I loved reading illustrated encyclopedias of insects and such. I could probably trace my survival sim hobby back to that youthful obsession.

Nevertheless, the harpies squirmed every time I slid my fingers down the feathers, and I wondered if they were going to be okay. For some reason, they were breathing heavily too. I was picking up a dangerous vibe from them.

“Anyway, we should get some sleep so we’re rested up for tomorrow. We’ll probably be able to make it to our frontline shelter.”

“Yeah.”

That night, I dreamed my whole body was being tickled by feathers. I couldn’t really remember the details, but I had a feeling it was kinda erotic—maybe because of the way the harpies were squirming around.

“Why do I feel so sluggish this morning?” I was puzzled the next day by the sensation.

“It’s probably just your imagination.” For some reason, Sylphy wouldn’t look me in the eye.

Hmm, for some reason I feel great from the waist down, though. Is this just my imagination?

Maybe I was still just exhausted from yesterday.

“G-good morning!”

“Good morning. We’re having lovely weather today, aren’t we?”

“Morning...”

“Good morning.”

“Mornin’.”

The harpies, on the other hand, were full of energy today. Not only that, but their skin and feathers seemed curiously glossier. Was it because of the bath? I had no idea what had happened, but I had a feeling they were all kinda blushing and creeping close just to brush me with the tips of their feathers. My body shuddered in response for some odd reason.

“Why am I getting a weird feeling?”

“What? Don’t let it bother you. I don’t care,” Sylphy said. I could’ve sworn she mumbled, “It was necessary, after all,” under her breath, but I wasn’t sure.

What is she talking about? Don’t tell me the harpies all did something to me with their you-know-what’s in my sleep. There’s no way. I’m sure I would’ve woken up. I wake up easily. There’s no way that wouldn’t wake me. Absolutely not. Right?

I tried to ask them all leading questions, but I never managed to get the truth out of them. *Nrrgh, my insides are churning.*

I gave up on trying to investigate; I made breakfast and cleaned the bathtub instead, and then we took off running in the badlands again. We didn’t find a single gizma lying in wait along the border to the Kingdom of Merinard. It could be that they were only found in the heart of the badlands.

We passed the fourth shelter and managed to arrive at the frontline shelter around noon. I was going to construct a fortress here; Sylphy was my guard. The harpies would keep an eye on the area for us.

With the blueprint function, I could put up walls and lodging in no time. Once that was done, I’d have to make a storehouse for supplies and a watering hole, as well as set traps all over the place as a last resort. What did I mean by that? Well, y’know. Ha ha ha. Art is an explosion!

After that, I would go down into the underground shelter and expand the deepest part of it into an escape route. We needed a way to bail in the event that we got surrounded. When I considered how to evacuate eight hundred or, worse, over a thousand people, I decided that it would be best to widen the tunnels. Naturally, I would build in last-resort traps there too. If the enemy tried to follow, it’d blow up in their faces.

Next, I would lay down farmland blocks inside the walls and plant some seeds. The crops would be ready to harvest in three days, so we should have plenty of food. Once I finished watering the fields, I would install the golem ballistae at the top of the bulwark. I’d equip each one with twenty bolts. It hardly rained around here, so I doubted they’d deteriorate.

With that much done, all we would have to do was wait for the liberation squads to return. Flamé, the tawny harpy, had particularly good night vision, so

we had her go ahead under the cover of night to check out the Holy Kingdom's army's fortifications.

There were no developments of note for some time.

We spent the next three days at the frontline shelter slash temporary fortress in that manner. I made more improved crossbows and churned out crossbow bolts to go along with them. There was a chance that we might need the freed citizens to fight with us.

These improved crossbows were the new lever-drawn model. They were called goat's foot crossbows in the crafting menu. I guessed they were named that way because of the shape of the lever? I could kinda see it.

Oddly enough, I slept more deeply than usual these past three days. I slept like a log from the moment I conked out all the way until morning. I was pretty sure I dreamed, but I wasn't entirely sure what about. I had a feeling they were erotic dreams, though, so you'd think I'd feel some pent-up frustration in the morning, but if anything, I felt refreshed.

And it wasn't just the harpies who seemed glossier now, but Sylphy too. *Maybe they really are putting me into a deep sleep and having their way with me overnight?* The seeds of doubt had begun to sprout, but I had no way of finding out for sure. I'd probably have to press Sylphy for an answer for real soon.

As I was busy thinking about how that would go, one of the harpies reported that she saw the rear guard of the Liberation Army headed our way. They must have left after we did.

I felt bad for the fifty people who had just arrived, but I was going to set them to work harvesting the crops right away. With the fifty people here and the sixty soldiers who had yet to return, that made a little over a hundred and ten people, which was as many trained soldiers as we could possibly send to our temporary fortress.

There were soldiers who were a bit better trained who we could hypothetically throw on top of the pile, but we had to divide them between our

main base, the frontline fortress, and the smaller bases along the way. We *could* add another hundred or so people if we were only shooting crossbows. But this was about how many we had to spare selecting for hand-to-hand combat training.

“So Danan’s staying back at the frontline fortress, then.”

“Yeah. They need someone to be in charge.”

At present, the only four people who could take command of the base were Danan, Sylphy, Sir Leonard, and Madame Zamil. Sir Leonard had taken charge of the Liberation Army abroad, so Madame Zamil was overseeing things at our home base. Since Sylphy was here with me, I supposed that meant that Danan couldn’t leave.

We waited another three days, all the while fortifying our defenses, planting more crops, and steadily building our reserves.

It felt like the quality of my sleep had returned to normal after the reinforcements’ arrival.

Yup, I’m totally going to interrogate Sylphy once things have calmed down, I swore to myself as I crafted our imminent meal.

Just then, we got a report from Fitch and Rei—they had spotted the rescued civilians.

“The Holy Kingdom’s army appears to be pursuing them. They haven’t caught up with our main force yet, but the cavalry is on our heels.”

“Sir Leonard and his unit are acting as the rear guard. I propose we offer them air support.”

Fitch and Rei offered their input, and Sylphy gave a big nod in response. “Yes, this is the time to use them. Kousuke.”

“Oh? We doin’ this?”

I took out the aerial bombs and nodded. We had tested them over and over, so this was the official model I came up with after adjusting the timing for the fuse and the number of discrete detonations, as well as improving the shell. The shape of the bombs hadn’t changed that much, but they were about three

times more powerful than the original prototype.

I attached aerial bombs to the feet of the five harpies who had returned from their routine patrols.

“I know I’ve said this a billion times already, but put your own safety first. Take care to drop these from a high enough altitude that you can’t be shot down. Also, be especially careful that our allies don’t get caught in the blasts. These weapons are no laughing matter.”

“Got it!” The five harpies gave a cheerful reply and then took to the skies. After achieving a high enough altitude, they got into formation and flew for the border.

I climbed to the top of the bulwark and followed them with my eyes, but they were soon out of sight. “Will they be okay out there?”

“You had them practice countless times with the dummy bombs, didn’t you? I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“I hope everything goes as they practiced.”

I was worried about Sir Leonard, Shemel, and the others too. I doubted that the old man quick to follow his gut or the stupidly strong Shemel would be done in that easily, but it might be a struggle keeping themselves *and* their charges safe.

And they were being pursued by cavalry, the natural enemy of foot soldiers. If all went smoothly, they could return fire with their crossbows, and every Liberation Army soldier had been outfitted with a pair of stick grenades, so surely they’d be able to manage if they used those as well. Even warhorses couldn’t withstand grenades; the noise alone would be enough to scare them off. I wanted to believe that everyone would be all right.

“We should prepare our defenses as well.”

“Yeah.”

I originally wanted to place pitfalls and landmines out there, but there was a chance that the freed people could wind up getting hurt. Instead, I had to go with my only other option: leaving wood spikes across a dry moat. Considering

everything we'd stacked up in our favor—the golem ballistae, crossbows, aerial bombs, and grenades—I was confident that we could repel the Holy Kingdom's army.

If the situation proved impossible, then we'd abandon this fortress, evacuate everyone through the tunnels, and retreat to our frontline fortress. In that case, I would activate the last resort once the enemy was lured inside. I really wanted to avoid that, though.

“Actual war... I wonder what's gonna happen?”

I was sure we had done everything possible to prepare. Now it was all up to fate.

I gazed out toward the Kingdom of Merinard, where the harpies had flown off. I still couldn't see anything yet. I had no idea how big this planet was, so I couldn't guess the distance to the horizon. I once heard that on Earth the cutoff point was five kilometers, but I was pretty sure that changed depending on your elevation.

Chewing it over, I checked the swivel guns. They were in good condition. My bolt-action rifle was ready too. The four times magnification scope I had installed on it could zero in on things a hundred meters away—using the sight along with it. To be fair, I hadn't yet done any tests to see if that varied per changes in air temperature and whatnot.

“You seem nervous.”

I jumped at the sound of a voice behind me. I looked back to see Sylphy dressed in her usual leather bodysuit fully equipped with Pale Moon, her revolver, two kukri knives, and a belt pouch containing speedloaders for the revolver. She also had something like a pouch hanging off her waist.

“Well, of course I am. I've never killed anyone before, let alone taken part in a war. Like I said, in the world I came from, I was just a regular guy who'd never been in any fights.”

“You fought fearlessly against gizmas, though.”

“Those weren’t people.”

“There’s no difference. Humans, demi-humans, gizmas—we’re all the same. We’re all alive.”

“It would certainly make things easier if I could look at it that way.”

But I can’t. Probably. I dunno, everything’s just felt so surreal since I got here.

I wandered around the forest, got beat up by Sylphy, nearly got thrashed by a mob of angry people from the Kingdom of Merinard, had a collar forced on me, slept with Sylphy, went hunting in the forest, did all kinds of things to defend myself and everyone else against gizmas, somehow got to know everybody, repelled a gizma raid... And now we were working toward reclaiming the Kingdom of Merinard.

Just how many days had passed since I first arrived in this world? It had been at least two months now. Probably not even half a year yet. Maybe three or four months total?

Everyday life was so different here compared to how my life was on Earth. It was exciting—like I was in a dream. I was unique and special in this world, and a lot of people needed me. I wasn’t one of many Kousuke Shibatas in this world—I was the one and only Kousuke.

“What’s wrong? You’ve got a faraway look in your eyes.”

“Uh, how do I explain it? Just feeling sensitive about going to war.”

Thoughts popped in and out of my head in a jumble. I was definitely not thinking normally. I put the bolt-action rifle away in my inventory, brought out a plastic bottle filled with water, and took a swig.

“Want some?”

“Yeah.” Sylphy took the bottle from me and gulped down its contents. There was something captivating about the sound her throat was making. “What? You’re making me feel self-conscious, staring at me like that.”

“Sorry.” I took the bottle back from her and put it into my inventory. I looked out again in the direction the harpies had gone. How far away were they? Would we be able to hear the sounds of explosions from here?

As I pondered the question, Sylphy wrapped her arms around me from behind, pressing herself against me.

“Kousuke, you don’t have to do anything if it’s too hard for you. I know this is ridiculous coming from me, since I’m the one making you do this. But you’ve helped us plenty already. No, I take that back. ‘Plenty’ doesn’t even begin to describe how much you’ve done for us. We’re completely dependent on you. And nobody is saying you have to stain your own hands with blood. I won’t let anyone force that on you. So don’t feel like you have to join in this fight.” Sylphy’s words were so sweet, permeating deep within my heart.

She was right. This fight was her fight and her people’s. As someone from another world, this was none of my business. I didn’t have the ideals or the moral compass within me to convince myself to go to war. I was only participating because of Sylphy.

Boom! Bang-bang-boom! We heard something like distant thunder. It was obvious what that sound meant. This world’s very first aerial bombing had begun. It would have been a one-sided massacre if they dropped the bombs from a position where the enemy couldn’t strike back.

“No, Sylphy. I do take responsibility for this.”

“What do you mean?”

I touched her arms around my body, lightly taking her hands in mine. “I made weapons knowing they’d be used for war, and I handed them over for everyone to use. I’m the only one who can make them. I can’t say that I’m innocent in all of this because I didn’t personally kill anyone.”

I slapped my cheeks, firing myself up. *Prepare yourself, Kousuke Shibata. You made your bed, so now it’s time to lie in it.*

Merciless, overwhelming, efficient. I would end this conflict in heaps of bodies and streams of blood.

“Now that it’s begun, it’s time to see it through to the logical conclusion. I’ll do it.”

Sylphy hesitated a moment. “Okay. Thank you, Kousuke.”

She tightened her arms around me. Another peal of false thunder rolled across the waste, louder this time. The battle had already drawn nearer.

“The bombings were a success! We dealt a heavy blow to the pursuing force!” Fronte prattled on excitedly after alighting on the rampart.

The other harpies who had gone with her were in a similar state. Their feathers were all ruffled up, maybe because they were so excited. I offered them opened water bottles and made them drink.

“I know you’re all excited, but you need to compose yourselves. Worked-up bombers are inaccurate bombers.”

Realizing they’d gotten too hyped up, the harpies looked sheepish at my words. Their feathers settled back down as they gulped down the water.

I turned to Pirna’s team. “Good work out there to you ladies too. Drink some water and take a rest. Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll take out something that’ll be easy to eat.”

The harpies who had gone with the liberation squads had also returned to our temporary fortress. There were five of them. Each liberation squad had brought a harpy scout with them, so the fact that all five of them were here now must have meant that the squads had converged.

I took out a table, wet towels for wiping their hands clean, and hamburgers.

“You guys should get some water, eat, and take a rest. Fronte, can your team still fly?”

“Yes, we can head out there again!”

“Then let’s get you all loaded up and sent out for another run. Prioritize those engaging the rear guard as your targets. If there’s no one doing that, then target the enemy logistics officers, followed by their main force. I’ve got the bombs laid out over there, so go ahead and put them on.”

Fronte and her team moved to the spot I had designated for equipping

bombs. Pirna watched them go and then turned back to me with a serious look on her face. “Is it just me, or do you seem a lot closer with Fronte and the others now?”

“It’s probably because we were together for so many days. We talked a lot.”

“I see.” Pirna had a dubious look on her face as she munched on her hamburger.

She ate a lot. I had a feeling that they must have given as much food as they could to the civilians.

“You guys brought back a few too many people, but you did a good job out there. I can wait to hear all of the details until later, but how effective were their bombings?”

“Mm, sure, yeah, I can tell you.”

The Holy Kingdom’s army had caught up to them this morning. Pirna told us how they had guessed that what had happened was that since they had finished off all of the soldiers from the Holy Kingdom stationed at the Bynysk Mines, they must have dispatched personnel to the mines from a neighboring town to check out why they hadn’t reported in, and that was probably how the enemy had discovered what they had done.

They had been easy to pursue once discovered. There was no way anyone was gonna be able to hide even the original eight hundred people’s footprints—and their numbers had swelled to over a thousand. Sir Leonard had known they would be traveling slowly, so they wouldn’t be able to avoid being caught.

“All of the units besides the fifth one, which returned early, converged as we had originally planned, with the sixth leading the way for those who had been liberated. The other four squads have been acting as the rear guard. It was hard to get by with what food and water we had, but we managed to persuade them that they only had to hang on until they reached this shelter.”

“You don’t have to worry about that part. We have more than enough water and food to go around now.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So, once they caught up to us...”

The first to attack them was indeed the fast cavalry unit. Over a hundred horsemen simultaneously charged them from the rear. At Sir Leonard's command, our side countered with a forty-strong volley of improved crossbow fire, felling about twenty with their first shots.

Sir Leonard's detachment followed up with a round of hand grenades. Those explosives were a crushing blow for the cavalrymen, and the riders fell into a state of panic. The frightened horses reared and threw off their riders one after the other.

Then came the second round of grenades. Over half of their unit was wiped out, and the remainder fell into chaos and retreated. The rear guard took the opportunity to pick off and wound stragglers with another crossbow volley.

"It's huge that you managed to repel them during their first attack."

"Enormous, yes. The cavalry stopped trying to charge us, probably because they recognized the threat we posed. They kept at a fixed distance after that and just followed us. I think they were planning to wait it out and pressure us until the main force arrived; they would have been able to outpace us so long as we had to match speed with the civilians."

"By the way, what was the structure of their army?"

"I think they had roughly a hundred cavalrymen, six hundred foot soldiers, and two hundred archers."

"We wouldn't have stood a chance against them once they caught up."

No matter how many crossbows and grenades they had, there was no way the Liberation Army could compete with such numbers, even with the overwhelmingly powerful Sir Leonard and Shemel on their side. They would've had a combined force just shy of sixty people, and they would've been wiped out in one hit.

"They were just about to catch up to us when Fronte and her team arrived. We still had a bit of distance between us and the pursuing forces, so the harpies didn't hesitate to drop the bombs on the enemy's front lines. Those things blow up something *fierce* now. Their main force was partially destroyed in one blow."

"Well, that's not the kind of thing that iron armor can protect you from."

The area of impact for the harpy aerial bombs was roughly twenty-five meters. If they spread out so that none of their explosions overlapped, they could decimate an army, especially if they were in tight formations. Instant death would be unavoidable if you were caught in the center of the explosion; rigid metal armor would just produce more shrapnel, closer to the wearer's vitals.

"Their main force was already in a state of confusion because of the bombings, so we hit them again, pretty much annihilating our pursuers."

"Huh? Really? Then there was no point in sending Fronte and the others back out again?"

If their cavalry and main force had been wiped out, then I doubted they'd be closing in on this base any time soon.

"No, I wouldn't say that. It's good sense to mop up after the battle's decided."

"Oh..." I had nearly forgotten that Pirna was a full-fledged military woman. She had no mercy for enemy soldiers. "So, you guys don't take prisoners or anything?"

"We used to when I was part of the Kingdom of Merinard's military, but I'm not so sure whether we'll be taking any now. We have no treaties in place about how prisoners should be treated."

Pirna was saying that even if we did take prisoners and try to negotiate with the Holy Kingdom, it was doubtful that they'd actually comply or even show up to the table in the first place. Right now, we were a small force of 300 people at most, even with the people we had liberated.

Aside from our actual military force and productive capacity, we were a small town of about 1,300 people. From the Holy Kingdom's point of view, with their vast territory and many vassal nations, our forces were piddling. I doubted they'd come to negotiations seeing us as equals.

"Also, while some did survive the onslaught, they were barely breathing or had lost limbs. We don't have enough resources to care for prisoners in that condition. The greatest mercy we could show them is to put them out of their misery."

“It’s a harsh world out there, huh?”

“This isn’t something we should think about too hard, you know. That’s the princess’, Melty’s, Lord Danan, and Sir Leonard’s domain.”

“I guess you’re probably right.” After hearing that, I gave up thinking about prisoners. Maybe it was heartless, but it was the result of creating such a one-sided battle. Soldiers in war had no choice but to accept whatever cruel fate might await them.

“Well, I’ve rested enough. Time for me to get back out there,” Pirna said with a smile as she went to join the remaining harpies heading to load up again.

“Huh? You’re leaving?”

Man, she’s got a ruthless side when it comes to the Holy Kingdom. I’d better be careful never to piss her off. Yeah. I watched Pirna and the other ladies gleefully take to the skies, each carrying a bomb.

“We have returned,” Sir Leonard announced.

“Yo. Those bombs weren’t nothin’ to sneeze at,” Shemel said.

A little while after the second onslaught from the harpy bombing unit, most of the refugees—no, the liberated people—and the Liberation Army units made it to the fortress. Many were covered in blood and mud; it was quite a sight. However, their expressions told me that they were all in good spirits.

The harpies on Fronte’s standby team were currently in pursuit of the routed army. Pirna and her squad had returned ahead of them to rest their feathers. Sir Leonard and Shemel were splattered in blood as well, but it was the blood of their enemies—they didn’t have a single scratch on them.

“These twin blades you made for me saved my life many times over.” Sir Leonard grinned broadly through the gore.

Yeah, he totally looks like a bloodthirsty lion with that grin. I’m terrified.

Hanging off Sir Leonard’s hips were the two mithril swords he had begged me to make. After agonizing over what kind of weapon to make for him, I wound up going for a simple straight sword. He’d earned his “Twin Fanged” moniker for

dual-wielding a single type of sword and had worn these blades everywhere since I handed them off.

“Glad to hear it. Maybe you should go wash off?” I suggested.

“Yes, I suppose I should. It would be impolite to stand before the princess covered in blood,” Sir Leonard replied.

“Okey doke. By the way, Kousuke, you better have somethin’ tasty for us to eat after,” Shemel said.

I just nodded as the two walked off to the watering hole. As I watched them go, Cuvi and his squad approached.

“Good work out there. Do you have any injuries?” I asked him.

“We’re fine. Already healed ourselves with those potions you gave us,” he replied.

“We would’ve been in big trouble without the crossbows and hand grenades,” Worg said.



Indy nodded several times before chiming in. “It’s thanks to the weapons and tools you made us that we were able to make it back here alive.”

These three weren’t caked in blood and dirt like Sir Leonard and Shemel had been. I asked them why.

“Those two went rushing after the cavalry after we threw our grenades,” Cuvi explained.

“Even if we had more than one life to lose, we wouldn’t have enough to make it out,” Indy added.

“Wish I could be like them,” Worg said.

The three all laughed humorlessly. They just threw themselves at the enemy? What were they, the protagonists of some kind of hack-and-slash video game?

“What was it like out there on the battlefield?” I took out a table and chairs from my inventory and passed out wet towels, water, and hamburgers as I listened to their explanations. It was important to get feedback.

“Gulp...ahh! Hmm, where do we even start?” said Worg.

“How about we start from when the Holy Kingdom’s army caught up to you?” I suggested.

Indy disagreed. “Nah, I think it’d be better to start with what led up to us deciding to raid the mines.”

“Yeah,” said Cuvi. “It all started when the first and second units liberated one of the frontier villages...”

The frontier village that the first and second squads had liberated was close to the aforementioned rock salt mines, and a lot of soldiers from the Holy Kingdom’s army had just arrived to replace the guards.

They waited until nightfall to quietly take out the sentries with crossbows, then launched their assault on the army while the troops were cooling their heels. Sir Leonard and Shemel played a very active role in overpowering the enemy forces in the blink of an eye.

“The replacement guards had always transported supplies for the guards

stationed at the mines. We figured that would be our chance.”

Sir Leonard thought that with those wagons and the load of supplies they carried, they could manage to somehow get all of the people working in the mines to the badlands. To that end, he spoke with the people of the village to learn about the situation at the mines.

He found out that some of their own had already been sent there, that the soldiers made them work under considerably harsh conditions, and that a few people died there within a week. Being sent there was considered a death sentence, and the best way to avoid it was to keep your head down and do your work obediently.

Upon interrogating the surviving soldiers, the Liberation Army discovered that the villagers had indeed been right. As for what happened to those soldiers, well, the villagers were allowed to deal with them. You don't need me to spell it out, right? It was pretty similar to what I nearly experienced right after arriving at the elven village. Unfortunately for those guys, they didn't have a mistress to come and save them.

They didn't know how long it would be before the next liberation operation was finished. They couldn't ignore the plight of those already in the mines, so Sir Leonard hurriedly called the other squads together to carry out a new rescue mission.

It was their best chance to strike, since the Holy Kingdom's forces still didn't know their modus operandi. Having reconvened, the troops advanced to the mines and struck after nightfall. They split into two groups, climbed the shabby yet sturdy log walls and quietly seized the perimeter by advancing from the left and right. They finished off the sentries in the mines using the same tactics and charged the barracks.

The charge itself went swiftly and smoothly; however, that was when the problems began. Among the people working the mines, there was a considerable number who were too weak, injured, or sick to walk. Most of them had been neglected, and they could hardly move in their condition.

That was where my potions came in. I had given one of each type to every member of our army just in case. At first, the liberation squads were against it,

since the glass bottles they came in were heavy, and they'd need a potion bag to carry them in so they didn't break along the way.

However, Ira and I had ignored their protests and persuaded them all to bring potion bags with them. I didn't know what Ira's reasoning was, but as a survivor, I knew that having medicine would considerably increase all of their chances of coming back alive. With those, they wound up saving the weakened miners. It wasn't the use for the potions I'd had in mind, but everyone got home safely in the end.

Sir Leonard and the liberation squads returned to the village they had liberated earlier with the recovered miners and their families—over eight hundred people total—took the Holy Kingdom's army's supplies and crops, and then began to withdraw.

Some of the people we liberated had once been adventurers or soldiers in the Kingdom of Merinard's army, so they equipped themselves with pilfered loot from the Holy Kingdom's army and helped to guard the people as they liberated frontier villages on the way back.

"We got by on the crops from the village and the supplies we seized."

"Though they weren't nearly enough for such a giant group."

"Thanks to Pirna's message, we knew that we only just had to make it here, so we managed to keep our spirits up. The problem was the people we were bringing along, though."

"It's because nobody's come back from the Black Forest in the last twenty years. They regained a little bit of hope when they saw our equipment, but for the most part, they had a grim outlook on things."

If I were in their position, I'd be pretty apprehensive myself. It was all well and good to be liberated from the Holy Kingdom and shown the way by a strong-looking crew, but their destination was a dangerous place that no one had returned from in decades. Not to mention that they were unable to eat their fill and had to sleep rough... Yeah, that sounded awful. It was incredible that the people they had saved had all managed to endure all the way to the fortress.

"And just as the Great Omitt Badlands came into view, that was when the

Holy Kingdom finally caught up to us.”

“One of the harpies spotted them. We were freaking out at first, since we heard that there were about a thousand foot soldiers and cavalymen pursuing us, but we were lucky that there weren’t so many cavalymen.”

“We would’ve been done for if there’d been another two hundred of them, though.”

From that point on, things went just as Pirna had described. The volleys from the crossbows and the grenades managed to pulverize the pursuers just as the harpies arrived with their bombs, and the cavalymen scrambled to get away.

“Cuvi managed to cunningly capture one of their warhorses.”

“I just got lucky. It lost its rider and started charging at us, so I leapt onto its back and managed to get it under my control.”

That warhorse was now resting with the other horses that had been pulling the wagons.

After hearing their story, I said, “But...I was all prepared, so I feel kinda let down.”

“Prepared for what?”

“I assumed we’d be attacked, y’know? So I steeled myself for the inevitability that I would have to fight too. I’ve never used a weapon against another person before; in fact, I’ve never even been in a fistfight!”

Cuvi and the others exchanged grimaces, then burst out laughing.

“Hey, I’m being serious!” I protested.

“Sorry, sorry. But you were spoiling to fight, huh? Wow, you’re such a serious dude,” Worg said as he clapped me on the shoulders.

“You don’t need to join in, y’know. All you have to do is focus on making us awesome weapons and items and medicines. Leave the fighting to us,” Cuvi said as he gave me a pat too.

“Yeah, that’s right. Breadmakers, blacksmiths, and alchemists need only focus on their respective jobs. If there’s no one else to fight, then we might ask them

to muster up their courage to join us, but you just leave the fighting to people like us while we're still in fit form," Indy added as he whapped me on the head.

That really hurts, you muscle-bound freaks!

"Plus, you know everyone in the Liberation Army acknowledges your superiority. It takes some real balls to stand right in front of a gizma and stop its charge."

"And you've got awesome powers too, which you use for everyone's benefit instead of just yourself. All without asking for anything much in return."

"You need to understand just how indebted we feel to you. We'd look scummy if we made you fight on the front lines on top of everything else you've done for us."

I felt on the verge of tears to hear such direct praise coming from them all. *Ahh, uh-oh.* The tension in my body had vanished, probably because the Holy Kingdom's troops had retreated, but I could feel the tears welling up.

"Hey, now. Don't tell me you're gonna cry."

"It's just I'm so happy to hear you all say that. It makes it feel like everything I've done has been worth it," I said.

"Ha ha ha. I'm surprised how easily moved to tears you are—garoo?!" Just as Worg sunk his teeth into a hamburger, his eyes went round and his wolf ears perked straight up.

I followed his gaze to find a smiling Pirna flocked by the other harpies. What was going on? They were smiling, but I felt a chill run down my spine.

Cuvi and Indy had disappeared. *That was quick!*

"You need to explain to them, okay?! You gotta! We're counting on you!" Worg then sprinted off at cheetah speed. I didn't think a wolf could pull that off.

"What's wrong, Kousuke? Were they bullying you or something?"

"Shall we pluck them?"

Pirna and her friends, who had managed to scare the three men off with just a look, all gathered around me with worry. *Pluck what?* That sounded scary,

whatever it meant.

“No, it’s not like that. I was just tearing up since they were telling me how much they appreciate all I’ve done. They haven’t done anything mean,” I explained.

“Oh, is that all? Here we thought they might be bullying you, even though we owe you our lives.”

“Then I suppose we shall refrain from plucking them.”

“Please, wipe your tears.”

“Hee hee. You’re so adorable.”

In the blink of an eye, the ladies had me surrounded, gently stroking my head and wiping my eyes with their soft, warm feathers. Their fawning made me feel awkward.

“Uh, um, thanks. I’m fine now, so you don’t have to do that,” I said.

“Now, now, no need to feel so shy.”

“By the way, we heard that Fronte and her friends gave you their feathers as a keepsake.”

“We’d like to give you ours as well.”

All five harpies from the liberation squad gave me their feathers as if they had been planning on it—a blue feather, a red one, yellow, white, and gray. The blue one was Pirna’s.

“C-cool. Thanks. By the way, is there some special meaning behind a harpy giving someone one of her feathers?”

“No, not in particular. It’s a part of our bodies, so it’s not like we just hand them over to anyone at a moment’s notice. Doesn’t that go for other races too?”

“I don’t know that much about this world, but that sounds about right for where I come from.”

I supposed some might give a lock of their hair to their beloved as a good luck charm when they had been summoned for war, but I had never seen or heard

of anyone actually doing that.

“There’s no special meaning behind it, but since we heard that you were so happy to receive Fronte and her friends’ feathers, we wanted to do the same as a way to show our appreciation as well.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks.”

I checked the feel of the five feathers before putting them into my inventory. Each one was uniquely named: The blue one was called Pirna’s Feather, the red one was Shou’s Feather, the yellow one was Orio’s Feather, the white one was Aegis’s Feather, and the gray one was Dicle’s Feather. I wondered why they weren’t all getting stacked together under a name like “Harpy Feather.”

I chatted for a bit after that with the touchy-feely harpies about what happened to all of us while they were on the road.

I’d panicked a bit when I heard that they were bringing close to a thousand people here, but fortuitously, it was much easier to accommodate them than I assumed. However, things were probably only going to get tougher from here. We had to escort the majority of these people to the main base, train those who could fight, and deal with a mountain of other things to do.

Our troubles were only just beginning, and I bet that it would be a do-or-die situation from here on out.

Once things had calmed down, we had to do something about these thousand people we liberated. Not that I’d be the one doing any of it. They had all been oppressed by the Holy Kingdom up until now, so everyone knew that they’d be very distrusting of humans. Even I knew without asking. It would just be stressful for everyone involved if I tried to approach them nonchalantly.

Nonetheless, I had things to do, so I had to go out in public. There was no way I could avoid running into any of the people who had been rescued. What were we to do, then?

“I think it’d be a good idea if I wore fake elf ears or a dog tail. Or hey, I could wear a sash that says ‘Screw Adol! He can eat shit!’ or something like that. Ooh, maybe a mask would work,” I suggested.

“No, you’ll be fine so long as you have one of us by your side. You should avoid doing anything weird,” Sir Leonard told me.

“Weird?!” Here I had been thinking about this quite seriously! He sure was mean.

My willpower had shot back up after the harpies comforted me, so I’d made my way over to our temporary control room to discuss our future plans with him and Sylphy.

“Let’s get back to the main subject here. For now, we’re able to feed all of the citizens you’ve brought here. There are 992 people here in total, and among them are 303 young men and 352 young women. By young, I mean those who we can train to fight after they’ve recovered,” Sir Leonard explained.

“And what about the remaining three hundred?” Sylphy asked.

“They’re all injured, elderly, or children. Among the injured and elderly, I imagine that many of them could be healed with Kousuke’s aid.” Sir Leonard straightened his posture as he answered. It sure was funny how differently he treated us.

“It’s time for my splints, then, eh?” I couldn’t do anything for lost limbs, but I could mend broken bones and severed muscles. It was also incredibly likely that the splints could heal an elderly person’s knee or back pain. It was a bit calculating of me to even think it, but I expected that they’d be very grateful to have those kinds of injuries healed. We’d be able to increase our military strength, and I’d gain more allies. It’d be killing two birds with one stone.

“As for our plans for the near future, we need to let the people rest for at least two days before we escort them out of here. In the meantime, I think we should take the time to recruit those fit to stay behind and fight. Leonard, how long do you think we have until the enemy will try to attack us here?” Sylphy asked.

“That’s a good question. The surviving cavalrymen will likely arrive at their fortifications along the border today. From there, they’ll dispatch fast riders to other nearby fortifications. Assuming that they’ll extract and coordinate their forces, ready their supplies, and then make their attack on this fortress... Hmm, it’ll probably be ten days at the earliest and within a fortnight at the latest.”

“Okay. Kousuke, where do you think it would be best to intercept them?”

“This temporary fortress isn’t bad, and part of me wants to use it, since I bothered to build it. But our frontline fortress has way stronger defenses. It might be best if I just collect as many of the materials that comprise this fortress as I can and then we hole ourselves up in the frontline fortress right away.”

“You think so? Very well, then. We’ll prioritize the escort effort. We’ll divide our forces into two groups: one to guard and guide the citizens and one to maintain this fortress. Those who remain here will make sure that our citizens do not wind up being pursued. They will keep the Holy Kingdom at bay until we have successfully led them all to safety.”

“A week should be more than enough time to get them all to the frontline fortress. After that is the matter of taking them to our home base,” Sir Leonard said.

“Indeed. Leave those who wish to fight here. We should take the opportunity to train them.”

“All right, then. We’ll go ahead with this plan.”

With an approving nod from Sylphy, our course of action was decided. Now I had a ton to do.

We let the thousand-odd citizens rest at the fortress for two days. During that time, I went to the underground shelters in between the temporary and the frontline fortresses and carried out the task of expanding their interiors. I had originally estimated no more than fifty people would be staying there at a time, so they’d be over capacity with a hundred people, let alone a thousand.

Meanwhile, we were doing well exterminating all the gizmas, but we still had a long way to go until they were completely wiped out. If I didn’t expand these shelters, the citizens wouldn’t have a way to safely spend the nights. Luckily, I had a buttload of stones and dirt, so I didn’t lack for materials in this endeavor.

I was escorted by Worg, Pirna, and a number of other soldiers from the Liberation Army on my expansion mission.

“I guess you didn’t need any guards after all.”

“Don’t say that. It’d be lonely doing this all by myself. And we’d be in trouble if something unexpected happened.”

“True, true.”

I slaughtered a gizma we encountered during the journey with rifled slugs from my shotgun. I didn’t want to waste any time screwing around fighting them. There was nothing to fear so long as Pirna flew on ahead and spotted them for us. We covered ground quickly, and I made the expansions right away. My guards cleared out the gizmas.

After four days of this, I’d expanded four of the shelters. They could accommodate about five hundred people now, and a thousand could be packed in if necessary.

Then, on day five...

“Welcome back.”

“Yes, thanks for your hard work.”

Danan and Ira came out to greet us. Jagheera was at the top of the bulwark, her bolt-action rifle in hand. She and Worg waved at one another. *Huh, are they friends?*

“We heard about the current situation from a harpy messenger. I assume this means that you’ve finished the expansions?”

“Yep, they’re good to go. They’re good for five hundred bodies easy, but we can go up to double capacity if necessary. It’ll be a bit cramped, but I’m sure it’ll be a hundred times better than sleeping outdoors.”

“Great. Good work. Go ahead and take the rest of the day off.”

“Okay. We’re heading back tomorrow. I’ve gotta repair the materials at the temporary fortress and set some cheap traps.”

Since I had touched up the temporary fortress, I wanted to make sure that if we had to abandon it and the enemy sought to make it a bridgehead, they would pay dearly.

“All right. Then before you go, there are some things I’d like to show you.” Ira looked up at me with her big eye and started pulling me by the hand. Her eye seemed sparklier, like she was begging me to praise her. It was pretty adorable, to be honest.

“I’ll take a look, then. This better be good if you want to impress me.”

“Prepare to be astonished.” Ira was breathing heavily through her nostrils. It sounded like they had come quite far in their research while I was away.

“Kousuke must be exhausted, so don’t overwhelm him,” Danan warned her with a forced smile.

Ira led me by the hand to the development room.

“Uh, hi, guys.”

As soon as we stepped in, Sykes and the women engineers who were waiting on him all came over to greet us. His face looked kind of drawn and emaciated.

“Ira...”

“It’s good they’re all getting along,” Ira said, averting her eye from me.

So Sykes had been sacrificed... Well, so long as everyone was getting along like Ira said, that was all that mattered.

“Anyway, come take a look at this.”

I felt bad seeing Ira brush Sykes aside like that. *Don’t worry, friend. I’ll never forget your sacrifice.*

More importantly, it was time to look at what Ira was so proud of. *What’s that? You calling me mean too? Don’t worry about it. You’ll go bald.*

“What’s this?”

It was a box as big as an elementary schooler’s backpack. It had a wooden and leather frame with metal components. It looked like it was to be worn on someone’s back like a backpack. Furthermore, it had a few dials and switches. I couldn’t tell what it would be used for just by looking at it.

“This is our prototype golem communicator,” Ira explained.

“Golem communicator. Really?”

“We’ll be able to talk over long distances with this. The golem turns spoken words into code and emits a magical wave that can travel pretty far. The receiving end parses the code and produces it as sounds.”

“Hmm.”

In other words, this device encoded their voices, turned it into data, and transmitted it via magical waves or whatever. Then the receiver decoded the data and played back the voice? *Huh? All I did was teach them about Morse code. They made the leap to encrypted transmissions just like that?*

“How far can you send messages?” I asked.

“We were able to communicate with the main base without any problems.”

“Seriously? That’s incredible! Like, seriously incredible!”

I was pretty sure the main base was at least 60 kilometers away. It was pretty incredible that they could communicate across that distance with a device of this size.

Ira had a self-satisfied look on her face upon hearing my praise. “Do feel free to keep up the compliments. Or even pat me on the head.”

“Positively amazing! I expected nothing less coming from a naturally gifted mage and alchemist like yourself!”

“Mm-hmm!” Ira had her hands on her hips and her flat chest puffed out with pride as I patted her head. It really was an amazing accomplishment. I totally agreed that she deserved to feel as proud as she did.

“Now you just need to figure out its maximum range,” I said.

“Yes, you’re right. That’s why I want you to help me with my experiment if you’re going.”

“So you just want me to wear this thing, then?”

“Yes. Can I count on you?”

“Of course.”

I tried putting on the golem communicator. It was pretty heavy, but I figured I’d still be able to run with it on.

Huh? What about Sykes? He got dragged off somewhere by the ladies while I was talking with Ira. *We should pray for his soul.*

They had also made prototypes for the portable heating vessels, the pot shield, and the quicklime heating bags. I was only able to add the pot shield and portable heating vessel to my crafting list using item creation. I took that to mean that the heating bags and golem communicators still had room for improvement.

“Yaaawn! I’m so drained!”

“I’m a bit tired myself.”

We did as many tests as we could, trying to find ways to refine what we had. I also made some materials for their research later. Since I’d been made to stay in the development room from the moment I arrived, the sky was pitch-black by the time I emerged. There were rooms in the back for the artisans to crash in, so I decided to sleep there today. I could’ve headed to the apartment Sylphy and I had been using, but it wasn’t like Sylphy would be there; it didn’t matter where I slept if I was gonna sleep alone.

“Guess I’ll eat and hit the hay. I’ll just bathe tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

I took out some ready-to-eat grub, and Ira and I ate together. Today’s menu was pasta with meat sauce and potato pottage. They were both warm and delicious, but it didn’t seem all that tasty, perhaps because I was so tired.

“Shall we head to bed?”

“Yeah.”

Ira and I headed to the lounge and flopped down on separate beds. *Ooh, there’s a nice smell coming from this bed. Probably because one of the female artisans regularly uses it.* Useless thoughts went through my head as my consciousness slipped away.

“Mm... Morning already?”

The light streaming in from the sliding storm shutter woke me up. On top of

running such a long distance yesterday, I had been cooped up in the development room for hours, so I didn't feel all too rested. But Sylphy was warming me up, so that helped me feel better.

Hmm? Wait a minute...

I gingerly lifted the blanket to check who was sleeping so close to me and found that Ira had slipped into my bed. She was sleeping peacefully with her arms and legs wrapped around me. The only saving grace about this was that we were both clothed.

However, Ira had taken off her robe and outer garments, so now she was only wearing what looked like a thin white negligee and panties. I could faintly make out her bare chest through the transparent cloth. I was in danger. If someone were to catch us, they would definitely think the worst.



This was *exactly* the kind of scene someone would happen to barge into...

“Hmm? Is there someone sleeping in—” Just then, the lamia blacksmith popped her head in the door. She immediately spotted me pulling the blanket down and the lightly dressed Ira clinging to me. She paused a moment before she said, “Well then, you two have fun now.”

And then she nimbly slithered off. *Hey, wait! It's not what you think! I swear!*

“Mm.”

I had quickly reached out, and the movement jostled Ira awake. *Crap!*

“Hey, Ira.”

“Good morning,” she said after a moment of hesitation.

“Mind giving me an explanation as to why you snuck into my bed just shy of buck naked?”

“Okay. Well, you fell asleep first.”

“Uh-huh.” I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. However, I was pretty sure that Ira had lain down in the bed opposite mine.

“So I was planning to go sleep in that bed over there.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I was cold, since it's not a very warm blanket.”

“I suppose you're right about that.” I took a closer look; the blanket was indeed on the thin side. I didn't notice, since I fell asleep wearing my clothes, but I certainly would have felt chilly wearing something like Ira was.

“That's why I slept snuggled up to you. You're warm.”

“Couldn't you have just put more layers on?”

“But then my clothes would get wrinkly. Besides, this is how I always sleep.”

“Is that so? But you should know that it's not safe to slip into a man's bed like that. He'll gobble you up.”

“I don't mind getting gobbled up if you're the one doing the gobbling.”

“What?”

The way she said that so bluntly left me bewildered. She looked straight up at me, her eye half-closed with drowsiness, but the way it glimmered told me she was wide awake.

“I don’t get bored when I’m with you. You’re always surprising me and inspiring me with your powers, knowledge, and ideas. I want to be with you all the time.”

“Uh, umm... Look, I’m happy you feel that way, but I’ve already got Sylphy in my life.”

“I know. You two love each other. And I have no intentions of coming between you two; I harbor no illusions that I ever could. I merely want you permission to be by your side.” Her big eye had a dewy look to it as she gazed at me, and her soft-looking cheeks were flushed. This was the grandest confession of her life, and I knew that it must have taken a lot of determination to do this.

Based on my moral values, it would be wholly unfaithful to both women to say yes. However, the moral values in this world were different—men could have relations with multiple women largely without consequence. In fact, it sounded more like they didn’t mind as long as the man could provide for them all. Nay, a man who was able to provide for multiple women was considered *admirable*.

As the saying went, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Since I decided that I was going to live in this world, perhaps it was something I was obligated to accept. And it wasn’t like I disliked Ira or anything.

“No?” she asked.

“Uh, the answer’s not no. But it feels like too much all at once. You know I’m not from this world. I’m not comfortable with how you guys do things here.”

“Yeah.”

“So, uh, let’s just start as friends.”

“We weren’t already friends?” Ira looked sad.

“No, no, no. That’s not what I meant. We were friends. We’ve been friends up

until now and still are. My phrasing was bad. We'll be closer than friends but not quite lovers, I guess?"

"I don't know what you mean by lovers, but that means I can be by your side, then?"

"One step at a time, okay?! And you gotta talk to Sylphy! And I'll talk to her too!"

"Okay, I understand. Hierarchy is important. I have no intentions of stepping out of line." Ira smiled happily.

Ahh, she's so cute. Ira is too friggin' adorable. But still, how the heck am I going to explain this to Sylphy? But wait, I still need to interrogate her about the harpies, so I'll just get her to talk about this head-on. Plus, there's something more important I need to focus on right now than love affairs. Since Ira understands, I should just put this matter aside for now and do what needs to be done.

I-It's not that I'm trying to avoid the problem at hand. Being unfaithful is wrong. Very bad. Yeah. But I'm just not used to it, so forgive me for running away or postponing it for a bit.

I ate in the development room and then went to where Danan was on standby so I could head back to the temporary fortress, but the moment Pirna spotted Ira and me, she was trembling as she addressed us in a strangled-sounding voice. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Kousuke has accepted me," Ira replied in a clear voice while clinging to me.

Pirna was aghast. She started mumbling something about how someone beat her to the punch yet again. It kinda scared me.

"Kousuke, what are your plans now?" Danan asked me, completely disregarding the exchange between the two women.

Wow. I respected him for having the gall to flat-out ignore the situation. I decided to follow his lead.

"I'm going to run back to the temporary fortress. The people we liberated

should be arriving here before long, so make sure you get everything ready to receive and escort them.”

“It shall be done. But are you planning to go alone?”

“Hmm, I’d rather not. It would be pretty dangerous. You never know what might surprise you out there.”

“Me! I’ll go with you!” Having recovered, Pirna started flapping both of her wings and hopping up and down. That seemed to be the only way she could express herself at the moment, and it came off as frantic.

“It would be really helpful if you could scout ahead for me,” I said.

“Right!”

“But I’d like someone to accompany me too.”

To be honest, I was uneasy about it being just the two of us. If we were both off doing our own separate things, and something happened to one of us, then we’d be in trouble. Maybe Pirna was okay with it because she was always off scouting on her own, but it made me feel pretty unsafe.

“True. Then how about our squad of harpies accompanies you? There will be five of us, so two will stick close to you and three will scout ahead and watch over the perimeter. That should work, right? You’ll be able to move faster, and I think it’d be best to station us at the temporary fortress anyway; that way, we can get in a bombing run.”

She wasn’t wrong. Short of an ambush, the gizmas would have no way to get me. Even if I did get surrounded, I could just escape by jumping on blocks and then shoot them to death from above. If the harpies were going to be on alert for me, then it should be no problem if I traveled on foot by myself.

I glanced at Danan, who nodded in agreement with Pirna. Ira, on the other hand...

“Grrr.” I had never seen her glare like that before.

Pirna looked away awkwardly. I was reminded of those giant, loud balloons with eyes drawn on them meant for keeping crows away.

“You can’t force him,” Ira warned her.

“Okay.”

“Only once you get the princess’s acceptance.”

“Right.”

It kinda felt like they were discussing my chastity right in front of me without giving me any room for input, but that was probably just my imagination, right? *Danan? Hey, don’t look away from me!*

“Brace yourself for the inevitable.”

“You better not forget that that applies to you too.”

I was well aware of how the widows with children were surreptitiously closing in on him. Cuvi had told me as much. Danan himself never talked about it, but he played with children a lot. *Huh? Wait, what if he’s a predator? I’ll have to investigate this later.*

I tossed all of my excess supplies in my inventory into the frontline fortress’s storehouse and then set out with Pirna and the other harpy scouts toward the temporary fortress.

As it so happened, there were eighteen harpies in our Liberation Army. Nine of them were at the temporary fortress, five of them were with me now, one was at the frontline fortress, two were at our main base, and one was stationed at the base closest to the Black Forest.

There was a shortage of them at the frontline fortress now, but we figured some would be part of the escort party, acting as messengers up and down the line. Someone had recently mentioned that with the golem communicators up and running, there wasn’t as much call for harpy messengers.

“We’re going to skip the first underground shelter and head to the second today.”

“If things are going well, we’ll run into the evacuees.”

“I believe so.”

They were all due to leave the temporary fortress two days after me, so if

they were moving at a steady pace, they would arrive at the second shelter before sunset. Tonight might make for cramped sleeping, and there were probably a lot of people who had yet to accept me.

Maybe I should make a detached house above ground. No, wait, I should make one in the sky instead. Yeah, I'll do that. That way everyone can rest easily. Thinking that made me feel much more comfortable about the whole thing. *All right. Now I'm gonna run with all my might.*

"It's quite remarkable how fast you are when you do that strange jumping movement," Pirna said.

"Right? But to be honest, it kinda weirds me out."

By skillfully utilizing diagonal movement and jump acceleration from command actions and slightly twisting my hips and using my own natural jumping and such, I was able to bound across the badlands at an obviously unnatural speed. I was sure that it looked kinda freaky from an outsider's perspective. I was moving at such a speed that I was essentially telling the laws of physics to screw off.

"I wouldn't describe it like that. But fundamentally speaking, how does it work?"

"I'm not sure myself."

I had wondered if I could reproduce bunny hopping or strafe jumping, and after practicing along the way to the frontline fortress, I finally managed to do it. By subtly changing my direction in midair, I could hop everywhere at an unbelievable speed. It was abnormal no matter how you looked at it.

"It reminds me of how we fly."

"It does?"

"When somebody asks me how I get airborne and stay there, the only thing I can say is just because I can, you know what I mean?" Pirna said as she glided overhead.

I could understand that. What with the size of their bodies, it didn't look possible for harpies to fly with those wings. I'd assumed that they used some

kind of wind magic or something, but if they were, they weren't aware of it.

"I suppose at this rate we'll arrive sooner than we estimated."

"Yeah. I guess I'll take the time to make somewhere to sleep and take a bath," I mused.

"A bath sure does sound nice. I heard how nice they are from Fronte and her squad."

"Baths are awesome."

I would love for everyone to adopt bathing practices. *That reminds me—with an inexhaustible supply of magic and water at the home base, maybe I should make a public bathhouse. That would be great; I'd love to make one. Then everyone in the world could adopt bathing culture. Ahh, I wanna jump in a bath this very second. Okay, gotta hurry so I can do that faster.*

"Kousuke, Kousuke, can you hear me?" Ira said over the golem communicator.

"Loud and clear. Go ahead."

"I hear you fine as well. Okay, so no problems at this distance, just like I thought."

We arrived at the second shelter with plenty of daylight left. Pirna and the other harpies went out to scout the perimeter and search for the evacuees headed this way while I finished making a place for myself and the harpies to sleep five meters above ground. I was testing the communicator as I waited for them to return.

"I'll go ahead and test its range again when we arrive at the third and fourth shelters tomorrow," I told Ira.

"Okay. That'd be great. Theoretically, we should be able to communicate as far out as the temporary fortress, but we haven't tested to make certain yet."

I had heard that the magical waves the golem communicators used could travel pretty far, but there was no precedent for the maximum range yet, so they had no idea what it actually was. They had a guess based on the output and wavelengths, but it had yet to be confirmed.

“We might actually want to use some kind of transfer station.”

“What do you mean?”

In other words, make a base station between one communicator and another that had the ability to receive the magical waves and then retransmit them. That would enable us to extend the distance the waves could travel. If we beefed up the receiver’s antenna and put the transmitter’s antenna in a high location, that should further amplify the operating distance.

“The question is whether we’d be able to secure enough power to keep that operating, and it’ll probably require maintenance. It’d also need its own golem core,” I added.

“Yes, but I think we can make it work. You come up with the most fascinating ideas. I’ll go talk to Sykes and the others and see what we can come up with.”

“Okay, just don’t work on it until you drop.”

“I won’t. You take care of yourself too, Kousuke.”

“Will do. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Mm-hmm. Good night. I love you, Kousuke.”

“O-oh... Thanks.”

And the call was over. *Ahhhhhhh! No! Miss, you mustn’t do that! Showing affection so blatantly like that makes me feel so shy! Ahhhhhh!*

“We’re back... Are you all right, Kousuke?” Pirna gave me an odd look as she caught me squirming with my face buried in my hands. *Why enter now, of all times?*

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, Kousuke...”

“I’m glad I decided to come along.”

The house I had built was suddenly abuzz with voices. It seemed that the harpies who had been accompanying the citizens tagged along.

“Fitch, Rei, and I were charged with escorting everyone,” Fronte the blue harpy said, flashing a dazzling smile at me. Fitch the orange harpy and Rei the

jet-black harpy nodded. “We’re guiding them,” she added.

“Okay. I’ll get the bathtub and food ready,” I said.

“A bathtub, you say? May we use it as well?”

“Fine with us. Right?” I asked Pirna.

“Yes, I don’t see why not after we’ve accommodated the citizens inside the shelter.”

“That sounds quite reasonable, Commander.”

Fronte and her squad hugged Pirna for giving them the okay. I totally understood how they felt. Once you knew what a bath was like, you could never go back. I supposed I’d need to build some public bathhouses after all.

“We’ll be back soon, then.”

“See ya!”

Pirna and the others flew off. After watching them go, I prepared the bathtub in the floating house; after I was done getting our meal ready, I made the house a bit larger. I had a feeling Fronte and her squad would be staying here with us.

Which reminded me—I was pretty sure those three had something to do with those *refreshing* sleep sessions I had a while back. I considered if I ought to get their testimony before I interrogated Sylphy.

I dunno. If my guess is right, I’d be opening a huge can of worms. And Sylphy might just play dumb about the whole thing. But surely she would be honest with me, right? Then again, maybe not. As these thoughts ran through my mind, the sun began to set.

Worried that the citizens wouldn’t make it here in time, I stepped outside to find that they had only just arrived. A thousand truly was an impressive number of people. They all entered the shelter without complaint, perhaps because this was the third night they’d spent in one. Judging by their expressions, it didn’t look like everyone was in low spirits or anything.

There were a lot of people looking up at the house I had made. I waved in a show of friendship, but only children waved back. Not like it was something to be sad about or anything. No, I was not crying, it was just kinda humid up there.

You didn't see anything.

Meanwhile, Pirna and the other harpies returned, washed their hands, and sat down to eat. Harpies weren't particularly good at using their fingers—or feathers—so they preferred food that was easy to grasp in their whole hand. They could use forks and spoons, but they weren't good at eating food that you needed to twirl like pasta or that you needed to cut with a fork and knife.

“We're gonna have something like a doner kebab today,” I announced.

“These vegetables are so fresh and delicious!”

“This sauce goes well with the meat.”

It'd be boring if I served hamburgers every meal, so this time I was serving my rough approximation of gyros. Since we had the time, I served fruits from the Black Forest as a special treat for dessert. They resembled wild strawberries.

“It feels like it's been forever since I last had these.”

“Yeah, we used to have them all the time back when we lived in the Black Forest.”

The harpies chatted merrily as they enjoyed their meal.

Hmm, they're actually all pretty cute now that I'm getting to see this side of them. I get the feeling that there are more beautiful ladies in this world than in mine. Every guy I've met has been good-looking too.

But what I'm really trying to say is that it was a treat getting to watch a bunch of babes have fun and enjoy what they were eating. It was like appreciating the ladies in indulgent chocolate commercials up close.

After we were done eating, it was bath time.

“You all go ahead and take yours first. I'll take mine after,” I told them.

“Now, now. You should be the one to go in first. We don't mind waiting.”

“That's right. I think you should be the one to take your bath first.”

I hadn't taught anyone the bath order hierarchy, yet for some reason, they were all eager to be prudent. Maybe they were worried that I wouldn't like taking my bath with the leftover hot water?

“It’s okay, I can always put more fresh hot water in. Ladies first, as they say.”

“Then I’d rather you join us!”

Fronte had just proposed something unthinkable. *Nuh-uh!*

“I think that’s a great idea! I’ll wash your back,” Pirna agreed.

“Huh? Uh, I don’t think—” I started, but then the other harpies voiced their agreement too. *No, no, no, no.*

“Yes, I think that’s a great idea. Don’t be shy.”

“Get ’im!”

“Wait, hold on! Why can’t you all be a bit shy about—whoa! You’re stronger than you look!”

“We simply *must* show our appreciation for all that you do.”

“Yes, we really are grateful.”

I put up a fair effort to resist, but all eight of them worked together to drag me to the bathroom. *No! Stop it! By “show your appreciation,” you mean you’re planning to do something lewd to me, don’t you?! Like you’d find in some indie porno comic!*

The full-body washing and massage with their feathers felt really good. Yeah. It was the kinda thing that once you experience, you can never go back. Furthermore, while I didn’t need to concern myself about my fidelity, they had gotten a very good look at me from head to toe.

Hey, stop right there. No massaging that spot. You can’t! That part of me is off limits! Off limits, I say! I don’t want people to start questioning my loyalty! No matter what they say, that kind of thing does count as cheating!

The next morning, I woke up feeling invigorated. I slipped out of bed, got dressed, and stretched. I felt wholly refreshed. Huh? You wanna know if there were any harpies in my bed? Blessedly, no. I rebuffed them all the night before. It wasn’t that I didn’t like them. They were all pretty, and I knew they—and Ira—were being forthright with their feelings for me. I appreciated how honest

and open they were.

But whether we'd become an item was a completely different topic. In that sense, that bath we took last night was a close one.

I want to believe that what happened would just barely be acceptable, but I'll talk to Sylphy about it, I vowed to myself as I broke down the walls with my pickaxe.

Right. My room was pretty much completely sealed, since I had replaced the door with a wall. I'd left a block empty to use as a window and air hole, but I'd obviously made it in such a way that harpies couldn't wriggle through.

If they forced their way into my bed and seduced me, I didn't know whether I'd be able to resist them, hence the preventative measures. I'd learned my lesson in the bathtub. Call me weak-willed if you want, but a man who didn't have any reaction to being fawned over, pursued, and seduced wasn't normal. At the very least, I wouldn't have been able to say no. Which was why I had to isolate myself from them.

Go ahead and call me a wuss all you want! Ha ha ha! Sigh... Time for breakfast.

"Good morning, Kousuke."

"Good morning." The other harpies echoed Pirna's greeting.

"Morning. Are you ready for breakfast?"

They all responded cheerfully. I was afraid that things would be awkward after I so blatantly rejected them by *Cask of Amontillado*—ing myself, but they seemed fine. I felt a bit of relief as I dished out bread, salad, vegetable soup, and sliced steak.

"Kousuke, are you fretting about what happened yesterday?"

"Well, yeah. I hope I wasn't being too blunt or stubborn." After all, the second I got out of the bathtub, I dashed into my room and locked myself in. Granted, I already apologized, since I was afraid I would give in if they tempted me any more than they already had.

"I know how this sounds coming from us, but please don't think about it too

seriously. It's enough for us that you would be interested if we tried."

I was pretty sure every man was born with the predisposition to start acting thoughtless when someone of their preferred gender started hitting on them, no matter how questionable it was. Or maybe not? No one would ever just thoughtlessly accompany a hottie that they didn't really trust. Right? Maybe this scenario was just too peculiar and hard to imagine.

As for me, I was the kind of creature who dropped his guard around anyone physically attractive. I thought that Sylphy was beautiful, even though she had beaten the crap out of me the first time we met. I had been pretty cautious around her at first, but I wound up sleeping with her when she came on to me. I didn't trust anyone who claimed they were in full control of their senses. Yeah. That was sensible, right?

"You ladies sure aren't afraid to go after what you want, though. You all act very different from what I'm used to. I'm not against it, but I just don't know how to handle it. Just wait until things calm down."

"Very well, we shall." Pirna was all smiles, and so were the other harpies.

Was that enough for them for now? Hmm. Hmmmm. Am I going to be okay? Sylphy is more than enough for me, but now Ira and the harpies... Plus, from what I heard, even Melty and Gerda have their eyes on me.

Ultimately, I needed to talk to Sylphy about this. It was beyond me, way outside my wheelhouse. But even Sylphy had been kinda ignorant about romance and stuff before we got together. Who the heck *could* I ask for advice?

I couldn't really count on the men either. Maybe Cuvi? If not him, then a well-educated woman. Ira was well educated, but only about magic and alchemy. Melty? Would that be safe? It felt awkward to ask a woman who wanted me about this kinda thing, though. But maybe I should just ask Sylphy about that too. Yeah. That made sense.

After we finished breakfast, we parted ways with Fronte and her squad. I completely demolished the floating house, and then we set off again for the temporary fortress. I made sure to register the floating house as a blueprint; I had a feeling I'd be using it again.

“Will we be staying at the fourth shelter today?” Pirna asked.

“Let’s figure it out when we get there. At this pace, we might even make it to the temporary fortress.”

“That’s true.”

We’d left early in the morning, so we arrived at the third shelter before noon. We took a short break there to check in with Ira via the golem communicator and catch our breath.

I had no idea what time it was, since my smartphone had run out of battery long ago, but based on the height of the sun, I estimated it was before nine o’clock. If I kept running at this pace, we’d arrive at the temporary fortress with plenty of time to spare. But it would be a bit of a problem if we pushed through and couldn’t arrive before sundown.

Thus, I delayed answering Pirna’s question and focused on running.

To be honest, if we wound up staying the night at the fourth shelter, that would mean that I would be spending the night with Pirna and her squad. Pirna and the other ladies had backed off for now, but I was unsure whether I’d be able to resist if they came on to me again. What I really wanted was to avoid spending the night in the same place as them under these circumstances.

I didn’t know if my prayers would be answered, but our journey was proceeding ahead of schedule. We ran into gizmas several times along the way, but with my giant ups, the offensive powers of my shotgun, and my ability to defend myself using blocks freely, gizmas were low-level trash mobs to me now.

I collected their carcasses, and we were able to arrive at the fourth shelter just before noon.

“That was fast,” Ira said over the golem communicator.

“I know, I’m surprised too.”

The shelters had been built at such a distance that it would take approximately six to eight hours for a person to walk between them, which meant they were about 30 to 40 kilometers apart. We had arrived there before noon, which meant I’d hit two of them in less than six hours. It probably had

something to do with the fact that I didn't have to worry so much about the rough terrain.

"Can you hear me clearly?" I asked.

"Yes, I can. It's great that we can communicate all the way out to the fourth shelter."

The distance between the frontline fortress and the fourth shelter was normally a four-day walk. That was easily over a hundred kilometers. The fact that we could communicate clearly over this distance meant that we had a very effective tool on our hands from a military perspective as well.

"If we can know the extent of the distance between us from the strength of the magical waves... No, wait, I guess knowing each other's location would be an unnecessary function," I said.

"It's not that we can't calculate it, but I think it'll eat up a lot of the core's capacity. We won't be able to avoid the degradation of its basic functionality."

"Yeah, that's another thing. We're going to the temporary fortress after we take a short break here."

"Okay, understood. Be careful."

"Thanks, I will. Bye."

I ate lunch with Pirna and the other harpies once I was done talking with Ira over the golem communicator.

"Your food is always so good."

"I love being able to eat meat other than gizma."

"Not that I mind gizma meat," I said.

For lunch, we were having honey-roasted chicken sandwiches and sliced pickles. I had wondered if harpies could eat bird meat and made sure to ask in advance, but they said they didn't mind at all. It made sense. Back on Earth, many birds' natural enemies were bigger birds. That was just the way things went.

Only three of the five harpies I had set out with originally were with me now.

The other two had gone on ahead to the temporary fortress. I assumed everything was fine there, but it would be dangerous if we rushed into a fortress under siege by the Holy Kingdom. There were hardly any more gizmas around here, so I was having them scout ahead.

Because of that, Pirna, Pessa the tawny harpy, and Tochi the green harpy were my lunch companions. The harpies who had gone ahead were Egret the white harpy and Asia the rust-colored harpy. As it turned out, harpies could be divided into two subraces: small birds and large birds. The small bird subrace was fast and turned sharply in midair, while the large bird subrace was stronger and had more stamina in exchange for slower speeds. The harpies staying behind were of the small bird subrace, while the ones who had gone ahead were of the large bird subrace.

“Such a shame. Here I was looking forward to taking a bath with just us tonight.”

“Ha ha ha. A shame, huh? But it’s best to get there as soon as possible,” I said.

“Our original plan was for three days, though. Why don’t we take a load off for the rest of today?”

“Yeah, that’s a great idea!”

“On second thought, nah. No way we can do that.” I shook my head, chuckling awkwardly.

Pessa was cheerful and naïve and Tochi was serious, but she liked attention. Egret, who wasn’t here, had a “noble lady” air about her. Asia was quiet.

“Yeah. It’s too bad, but we don’t have any time to relax quite yet,” Pirna said as she stood up, finished with her sandwich. She started checking the condition of her wings. Pessa and Tochi followed suit.

The harpies always made sure to examine their wings before they flew. I assumed it was because even a single feather out of place could lead to some unforeseen accident. The secret to their flight must’ve been hidden within every single one of their feathers.

“Shall we get going?” I asked.

“Yes!”

I demolished the floating house, and we set off again.

“Kousuke! You’re back!”

“Uh, yup.”

Sylphy hugged me the instant we arrived. *Hey, you’re hugging me too tightly! You’re squeezing groans out of me, and not the good kind!*

“Good work out there, Kousuke. Have the citizens managed to arrive at the frontline base safely?” Sir Leonard asked.

“They should be getting there now. Shall I try communicating with Ira?” I said.

“Communicating?” Sylphy released me with a puzzled look. I guessed Egret and the other harpies hadn’t told her about the golem communicator yet.

“Weren’t we saying how we wanted a way for one liberation squad to communicate with another over a distance? Ira and the other researchers made this golem communicator. It worked just fine back at the fourth shelter, so let’s see how it does here.”

I switched it on and tried calling her, but there was no response.

“Hmm, guess the magical waves don’t reach this far out. They made it between the frontline base and the fourth shelter, so I guess that means it has a range equal to a four-day walk.”

“That much? Incredible,” Sir Leonard said.

“I’m pretty sure that if we set up relay stations, we should be able to communicate across an even farther distance. I think Ira’s got everyone working on it now.”

“Hmm, interesting. I get the feeling the very foundation of this war is about to shift.”

With these golem communicators, we could ambush using decoys and pincer maneuvers all we wanted. When it came to defense, we could swiftly report a siege. One day, if we could make something like headphones and smaller

versions of these for harpies to wear, then we'd even be able to establish an airborne early-warning system.

We could have a bird's-eye view of the entire battlefield and share information about the enemy's movements. It'd be a complete nightmare from the enemy's point of view. Harpies had good vision, so I bet they'd be able to tell us the locations of troops waiting to ambush us, and then they could pulverize them by bombing them from the air. *Jeez, who needs ground troops when you've got harpies?*

If I were the enemy, I'd focus on a way to counter aerial attacks. It wouldn't surprise me if there was a combat spell that might function as a hard counter. I probably needed to start planning around that.

"At any rate, we can confirm that the people made it as far as the second shelter yesterday and then left, so I'm sure they'll be fine the rest of the way."

"I see. Does that mean that you ran all the way here from the frontline fortress in two days? That's practically the same speed as a centaur," Sir Leonard said.

"Yes, that is pretty fast... Like, really fast. And you don't look tired at all," Sylphy added.

"About that..."

I showed them my new bunny-hop strat in order to alleviate their doubts. It was easy now that I was used to it. The important part was the rhythm.

"That's a peculiar way to move," Sir Leonard said.

"Your powers make less and less sense, but are you accelerating unnaturally while you're midair?" Sylphy asked.

I had a feeling Ira's eye would go dull again if I showed her this. That just made me want to show her more. I'd learned to enjoy blowing her mind.

"Well, that's about all on our end. Anything happen here while we were gone?"

"Yes, as it turns out..."

There had been some movement at the fortress along the border to the

badlands. The enemy was stockpiling supplies, steadily preparing for war.

“That’s the impression the harpies got during their reconnaissance. Their troops number over five thousand. They’ll probably make their move within the next few days,” Sylphy said.

“That’s a lot.”

Still, with our fortress, crossbows, ballistae, and aerial bombs, I had a feeling we’d manage.

“However, there’s no need to face them head-on. We could lay some traps and then say adios.”

“Traps?”

“Yeah, traps. I’m gonna go all out laying them.”

Mwa ha ha! This fortress will be their grave. Oh, but perhaps we should send them a declaration of war first? We aren’t barbarians, after all; we’re a civilized people. It’s important to make our stance clear to them. Not that there’s any room for discussion here.

“Assuming we can’t avoid clashing with them, then the question is where we can find common ground,” I told Sylphy and Sir Leonard.

“Yeah.”

“Indeed.”

It was easy to start a war. The hard part was ending it. Since all kinds of elements were involved, such as fatigue, supplies, the support of the populace, national profits in securing strategic defensive and communicative positions, as well as mines and land, leaders, and national pride.

“It goes without saying that Sylphy will be our leader, but who could possibly be theirs?” I asked.

“Their supreme leader is Holy King Alfred III, but in this case, it’d be the consul who reigns over the Kingdom of Merinard,” Sylphy told me.

“That would be an archbishop of the Church of Adol, Aureus. A swine of a

man who is adept at working his subjects to the bone to fill his own pockets.” That was scathing criticism coming from Sir Leonard, who always conducted himself in a gentlemanly fashion. I wondered if he’d had some run-in with this man before.

“It might be best for our leaders to try to negotiate peace first, but I doubt he’ll listen,” I said.

“I concur. There’s too big of a gap in our numbers,” Sir Leonard agreed.

From their point of view, they had nothing to gain from a pathetic force of scarcely more than a thousand.

“We could always ask a third country to mediate? But I doubt that’d do us any good,” I said.

“For the same reason too. No one would have anything to gain by mediating a dispute between a puny force with no leverage and a major power like the Holy Kingdom. We need to expand our influence enough to contend with their nation on equal footing,” Sir Leonard said.

One thing I definitely understood before we began all of this was that it wasn’t going to be easy. But I figured we’d be able to pull it off if we did whatever it took.

“Just wondering, but before you guys start a war in this world, do you have any customs of exchanging words or giving a declaration of war?”

“We usually send a messenger bearing a white flag, and then our commanders meet on horseback to call for one another’s surrender and exchange formalities,” Sir Leonard answered.

“Are you guys planning to do that this time?”

“No. In his eyes, we are the remnants of a rebel army he annihilated three years prior. He’d only see us as rebels stirring up trouble.”

“Zero room for discussion, then, huh?”

“If there *were* room, the Kingdom of Merinard wouldn’t be their vassal right now.” Sylphy shrugged, donning a cynical smile.

Hmm, I guess so.

“Well, the only thing we can do is show off our power, then. Kousuke, go ahead and start making whatever you want.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Far to the north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily making their plans, a stout man was listening to a nimble-looking man dressed in leather armor’s report inside a castle. The rotund man was dressed in the pure white garments of a priest with ornate golden embroidery; he was most likely of high standing within the clergy.

“The inferior races are getting cocky!” The archbishop slammed his fist on his office desk, but in his fury, he hardly felt the pain. “The glorious Holy Kingdom’s army did *what*?! They turned tail from a paltry gang drawn from the dregs of the inferior races, armed with scraps and toys?! Think carefully before you speak in jest again!”

“A-according to the report, they were attacked with some kind of unknown magic—”

“Magic, you say?” He glared at the messenger, cutting off the man’s incoherent explanation.

It was true that races such as the elves and the cyclopes excelled at magic. However, he was certain that the majority of the rebel army was composed of a jumble of beasts. Those creatures were gifted with physical strength, but they could not compete with the superior races and the Holy Kingdom’s army.

“Are you saying that there was a mage among them who could mow down a thousand soldiers? They were mostly escaped slaves, weren’t they? Or are you telling me that the Witch of the Black Forest and the other elves have been cooperating with them?”

“I-I don’t know...”

“Tch.”

He simply didn’t have enough information. No concrete reports had been made, and he wondered if the frontline general was desperate to hide his

failure. Just the other day, the officer had written the archbishop a triumphant letter about how the army had wiped out a pack of gizmas, but the unfavorable turn had rendered him silent.

“Tell them this: I will clean up their mess as a matter of unpleasant necessity, so gather as many resources and people as you can and destroy the beasts’ hodgepodge army in one swift stroke.”

Fortunately for the archbishop, he had already prepared enough resources and men to capture the Black Forest. No matter how incompetent they may be, so long as he had enough troops, he felt they would be able to rout any kind of rabble. In the end, war was all about numbers. No amount of soldiers, quality weapons, or cheap tactics could turn the tide against a military force more than five times their number. Or so he believed.

“Y-y-yes, Your Excellency!” The messenger saluted and left the room as if he had been expelled from it.

Watching him go, the archbishop clawed at his pounding head. He would have to make arrangements for even more supplies and funds to be sent to the front lines. Also, he had to pay condolence money for the soldiers who had died in battle. To make matters worse, work in the rock salt mines had screeched to a halt. Considering how many people had died, he had a duty to report this to the capital. His position would be in danger if he didn’t manage to cover up this fiasco.

As he thought about how to procure future funding and the bother of behind-the-scenes maneuvering, he sighed deeply. *Damn those inferior races*, he thought.

The archbishop began to ponder the contents of the letter he would write back to his home country, not bothering to hide his irritation. There was the sound of a droplet of water splashing in the corner of the room, but the archbishop didn’t hear it.

Chapter 7:

Let's Blow Up the Enemy's Fortress!

I DOUBT IT REQUIRES any explanation at this point, but I was planning to blow up the fortress. I'd place explosive blocks all over the place so that there wouldn't be the faintest useful trace of it left. That went for the Holy Kingdom's soldiers as well.

The question was, how were we going to ignite it? We had only two options that let us safely and reliably detonate it from a distance. The first was using a time fuse. We could set it in advance to ignite hours later, and then it would detonate the explosive blocks at the appointed time.

After experimenting, we discovered that the explosive blocks could chain one another as long as they were within the blast radius, so if I arranged it correctly, all of the blocks could blow up from just one.

The other way was to use a mithril-copper alloy circuit trigger, which I had made using Ira's help. Mithril-copper alloys were highly conductive of magic, so we could connect the wiring between an explosive block and a magical igniter. We could instantly detonate them with the press of a switch. Or we could even connect it to a trap. An unwitting intruder would make the whole place go *boom* by stepping on the wrong spot or pressing a switch on a wall.

The problem was the materials required for each option. The mithril-copper alloy wiring didn't require that much metal on its own, but a couple hundred meters of the stuff was no joke. And this time, there would be no recovering materials once they were used; I was gonna have to bite the bullet on this one. You couldn't solve problems this big without making some sacrifices.

"Hmm, what to do?"

The ideal scenario would have the whole army inside the fortress when I blew it up, but you couldn't *fit* a force of five thousand in here, no matter how tight you crammed 'em. It might work for the home base, but this fortress could only handle a little shy of a thousand. I was sure that it would be tempting for them

all the same, since it was safe from gizma attacks. They'd be cautious, but some fraction of their army would venture inside without a doubt once they confirmed our withdrawal.

"Should I set a trap at the back of our provision store? Or use a time bomb? Well, I guess a time bomb will do."

It might be good to set it to detonate in the middle of the night. I was pretty sure that time bombs didn't exist in this world yet, so the soldiers wouldn't be on the lookout for them. They'd search all over to see if there was anyone hiding before using the fortress for themselves, but they wouldn't be on the lookout for the source of any mysterious ticking sounds.

I should set several fuses to go off at once in case one of them misfires. As long as one manages to detonate properly, the whole thing should go up in smoke.

"Well, it'd be best to fit the explosive blocks into the walls."

I had already placed a number of them in the walls when I was building this place. I would check on their condition and add more where necessary. There were a lot of facilities in the base where I hadn't put any, so I'd have to go touch those walls up.

"What's wrong, Kousuke? Why are you just standing there?" Sylphy asked, worry etched on her face. She was accompanying me while I was installing blocks. I must've zoned out after placing the last block in the lodging wall.

"Nothing. I was just worried that some idiot might set fire to this before we want it to go off."

"It should be okay. But should we put up a sign or something about no open flames if you're that worried?"

"I think that'd make it even more tempting."

I couldn't help but laugh at the suggestion. Having "no open flames allowed" plastered all over the walls of the place I was staying wouldn't be great for morale. *But things should be okay the way they are now, right? Yeah, it'll be fine. Probably.*

It'd be impossible to get the whole army in here anyway. So long as one of the

explosive blocks detonated, then the secondary explosions would reduce the fortress to smithereens. They would get caught in the blast, and we'd have achieved our goal so long as the temporary fortress got demolished.

They say that the crafty schemer drowns in his own scheme, so I'd use enough blocks so that we could be sure it'd blow up. Yep.

"Oh, can you at least notify everyone that they can't use any open flames? The last thing we'd want is for it to explode on us," I told her.

"Eep, good point."

It would be no laughing matter if we all wound up dead because of an honest mistake.

The day of installing explosive blocks and retrieving materials went without a hitch. The next day, the harpies confirmed first thing in the morning that the enemy was starting to move.

"One thousand cavalry. Four thousand infantry and archers and five hundred logistics officers. In total, some five and a half thousand men."

"Hmm, five times more than the number of evacuees. Were they planning to launch an assault on the Black Forest?" Sylphy wondered aloud.

"It is a questionable number of troops. For now, I believe they plan to use this fortress as a bridgehead to pursue us."

"When will they be here?"

"I estimate they will set up their battle formation not far from the fortress before sunset and begin their attack tomorrow morning."

"Hmm, what shall we do?"

It'd be really bad if we left at the wrong time. We wouldn't stand a chance against 1,000 cavalymen chasing after us.

"Since we'll be escaping through the tunnels, should we put up a fight here until just before noon and then flee?" I asked.

"It's a smart idea. They'd think it strange if we ran without putting up any resistance at all," Sir Leonard said.

“That might not be the case. They know that we harpies are gathering information on them.”

“Is that so? It might be more unnatural if we *don't* run, and they know we know the vast difference in our numbers. Very well, we should depart right away. Kousuke, can you set the time bombs to go off tomorrow night?” Sylphy asked.

“I sure can.”

“Then go ahead and do that for us. Leave some food behind in the storehouse to make it look like we fled without a moment's delay.”

“Okay.”

We all made haste to get ourselves ready to withdraw and were ready to go a half hour later. There were about fifty people here. They were all relatively seasoned soldiers who had been warned in advance that the enemy would be coming and that we might be evacuating as a result, so there'd been no disorder in the ranks so far.

“I wish we could watch the plan unfold for ourselves, though,” I said to Sylphy.

“Me too, but we can't put ourselves at risk.”

“True.”

Sylphy and I would most likely be able to make a getaway even if we were pursued by cavalymen, and the enemy would be thrown into a state of confusion once they heard about the fortress blowing up, so I figured we'd be okay. But Sir Leonard yelled at us because it would be preposterous for their supreme leader and the cornerstone for their supplies to stay in the thick of it. It was a fair argument.

Therefore, I would make a safe lookout post where three people could stay and watch. We decided that three harpies would stay behind. The time bomb was fully loaded, so they'd make sure that the whole fortress blew up.

“That being said, Your Highness, I sincerely entreat you not to remain here to watch.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t have to keep reminding me.” Sylphy returned Sir Leonard’s serious expression with a wry smile.

“That goes for you too, Kousuke. I ask that you swear it. If you go back on your word, then I shan’t hesitate to inform Melty,” he warned me.

“Okay, yep. Anything but that.”

Both Sylphy and I stood no chance against Melty. Sylphy had been her friend since they were kids, and I saw Melty as a ruthless company boss. Melty was probably the strongest in the Liberation Army.

We parted ways with Sir Leonard’s force and headed over to a slightly elevated rocky mountain that was a little ways away with the harpies. I doubted we’d be attacked by gizmas here, and we got a good view as well.

“Would it be better if we hollowed out a bit of the mountain so they won’t stand out?”

“Hmm, good point.”

It was important to adapt to any situation. I made a scaffolding where they couldn’t be seen from the temporary fortress, made an entrance, and chipped away at the mountain using my pickaxe so they had a room. Then I made several windows that faced the fortress, added a watering hole and some furniture, and set up some explosive equipment here as well just in case it proved necessary. With that, the lookout post was complete.

“Aren’t you taking it a bit too far?”

“True, the explosives are probably a bit much. But it’d be a nuisance if the Holy Kingdom found this later and used it for themselves.”

“True.”

The harpies who were going to be staying were Pirna, the tawny harpy Flamé, and Pessa.

“We shall meet up with you again the day after tomorrow after we see what happens,” Pirna said.

“Okay. Be careful,” Sylphy told her.

“For real. Stay out of danger,” I added.

“We will!” all three replied.

We left the three of them and followed the other harpies, Sir Leonard, and the other troops. I used my bunny hop, Sylphy ran like normal, and the harpies flew. It took a little while to catch up from the lookout post, but we managed to reach them before they got to the fourth shelter. They were taking a noontime break.

After a light lunch, we all headed out to the fourth shelter. Along the way, the golem communicator on my back started to ring. I ignored the curious looks coming from the Liberation Army soldiers as I moved the golem communicator around to my front and answered.

“Kousuke here.”

“Good, you picked up. I’m relieved.” It was Ira; her voice was unmistakable.

“Yeah, sorry about. Unfortunately, the temporary fortress was out of range after all.”

“I see. Are you okay? Any injuries?”

“We’re all fine. The enemy’s on the move, so we’ve set traps all over the fortress; we’re retreating now. We left Pirna and two other harpies behind at a lookout post so that they can confirm the traps went off properly before reconvening with us. Other than that, we’re headed for the fourth shelter now and should be arriving soon.”

“Okay. What is the configuration of their army?”

I gave her the breakdown Pirna had told us.

“That’s a lot.”

“Yeah. But I think we’ll be fine. Our frontline base’s defenses are flawless.”

“Right... Okay. I’ll convey the information.”

“Thanks.”

I ended the call and put the golem communicator on my back. It went without saying that everyone was shooting me curious looks. *Yeah, yeah, I get it.*

“This is the latest invention from the research and development team. As you just witnessed, it’s a tool for communicating across long distances. That was a call from the frontline base. I don’t know how it all works, exactly, but we’re going to be giving these to our frontline troops from now on.”

I was immediately bombarded with questions, despite my efforts to explain. *No, I doubt we’ll be getting these for personal use. At least, not for the time being.*

Well, it might be nice to have something like radio broadcasts. We could make devices that only received certain signals and put a huge broadcast antenna in the home base with its abundance of magic, then put out a show on a dedicated frequency. We could have daily news reports and feature some of the local musical talent. I’d be sure to propose this idea as soon as we got back.

I pondered the possibility as I answered everyone’s questions, and before long, we’d arrived. Once we were there, I made a simple lodging for just Sylphy and me outside the shelter so we could be alone tonight. I was looking forward to it, but there was something we had to talk about before we got to the good stuff. Namely what happened with the harpies, Ira’s confession, and the oncoming war.

I was more nervous about talking about relationships than I was about war. In my defense, it wasn’t like I’d be on the front lines, but I probably should have been a bit more worried about the whole thing.

So...what would we talk about first? I thought to myself.

“It feels like it’s been so long since we had some time alone. About a week or so now?” Sylphy said.

Sir Leonard and the harpies were staying in the underground shelter tonight, while Sylphy and I would spend the night in a floating house. I got the harpies to restrain themselves.

“Yeah, sounds about right,” I replied.

It wasn’t exactly like the furniture in Sylphy’s home, but we were seated on a similar-looking rattan couch as we sipped mead. Incidentally, I’d heard that

people had started making alcohol using the crops at the home base—ale from barley and distilled liquor from potatoes.

“Normally, you’d be busy making something, and if not, we’d be in bed right about now.”

“Well, I think we’ve got a lot to talk about first. I have some questions for you too. We’ve been working nonstop lately, y’know? Gotta find time to take it easy once in a while.”

“Hee hee. You’ve got a point. I wouldn’t say we’re in a place to kick back and relax, but maybe that’s precisely why we should embrace a moment of normalcy.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

Sylphy smiled as we nursed our drinks and talked about what happened while we were apart. While I was gone, the crops finished growing at the temporary fortress, and even Sylphy had helped out with the harvest. They had a stewed potato party using the freshly harvested potatoes.

The potatoes we grew at the fortress were more like taro roots. These kinds had once been native to the Black Forest, but the elves had spent ages selectively breeding them. They were filling and pretty tasty just boiled with a little salt.

“The wolf beastfolk were especially enthusiastic while we were digging up the potatoes. I was under the impression that they’d prefer meat, so I was surprised by how much they like those potatoes and other sweet, starchy food.”

I wondered how much of it was just a deep-rooted love of digging holes in the ground. They’d worked pretty hard when I asked for people to collect clay too.

“Yeah. I heard that wolves and dogs are both like that. Maybe they’ve still got some kind of instinct for it deep down.”

“Well, they get mad when you treat them like dogs.”

Wolf beastfolk were a proud race boasting their superiority over domesticated dogs, but a lot of them looked more like Shiba Inus or chihuahuas rather than wolves. In my opinion, there were way too many variations among

the beastfolk races. Some had faces that came right off the critter, whereas others looked like humans with a subtle beastly flair.

Sir Leonard had the face of a lion, and Worg had the looks of a Siberian husky. Danan was from a line of fighting bulls of some sort, but he only had horns growing out of his head; the rest of him just looked like a jacked human. Gerda the bear beastfolk and Jagheera the cat beastfolk looked like women with the respective animal ears, and Melty was a woman with curly horns.

On the other hand, I'd once tried and failed to heal another bear beastfolk's missing limb, and *they* looked like they shouldn't have been walking around on two legs everywhere. Beastfolk were beastfolk so long as they had at least one animal feature. That was really the only defining feature among them.

It was easy to tell with harpies, like Pirna, and the blacksmith lamia. But there were a lot of variations even among their races. Some harpies simply had wings at the ends of their upper arms, while others had wings or bird feet below their thighs. However, their faces and torsos were all pretty humanoid. Overall, they seemed to all have small chests. That was probably because big breasts would just be dead weight for women who spent long stretches airborne.

How did I know so much about their figures, you ask? I looked. Thoroughly and carefully.

"What happened during your trip?" Sylphy asked.

"Well, nothing really worth noting. We took out any gizmas that popped up, and when we got to the shelters, I did what needed to be done to expand them. Then we slept. As soon as we got to the frontline base, Ira dragged me off to the research and development department and gave me the golem communicator. She had such a triumphant look on her face."

"Ha ha ha. I can picture it. That thing is really impressive, though."

"Yeah, there's so many ways we can use it too. For example..." I told her my idea for golem radio broadcasts.

"I see, so it has more than just military uses. That's a good idea. I'm all for it."

"There're probably a lot of people who feel anxious about living in a new land. We should try to offer what comforts we can."

Though radio broadcasts in themselves had military applications. They could be used for propaganda, after all. Manufacturing a little public consent wasn't such a bad thing, so long as we didn't get too extreme with it.

"And, uh...Ira told me how she feels about me. She said she wants to be together forever."

"Is that so? Took her longer than I thought it would. Did you return her feelings?" I couldn't sense any anger or exasperation from Sylphy's expression. Then again, I couldn't guess how she felt. Not a bit.

"Uh, um, well..."

What in the world should I tell her? That I kinda agreed to go out with another girl? I'm not so sure about that. But it'd be a mistake to apply my world's moral values to this one. This world has its own rules, or rather, its own set of moral values.

"Ira said that she recognized that you and I love each other and that she didn't want to get between us. All she wanted was to be by my side."

"Oh. And then?"

"Uh, well, I said we should start as friends but be closer than friends or lovers... Basically, I said okay. I do like her, and I enjoy being with her, but I told her it would take time before we could love each other like you and I do—er, y'know, that physical relations would have to wait. And she agreed."

"Why did you say that?"

"Uh, because I love you. And, for example, if you told me that another man told you that he loved you while we apart, and you said okay and had sex with him, then I'd die from despair, jealousy, and anger. I wouldn't be able to stand it. If that were to happen, I know I'd kill the guy and then I'd die." I hated the very thought of it. It made me want to die.

"Ha ha ha. Love is a serious matter, isn't it? But that kind of thing would never happen, so don't worry. I'd strangle anyone insolent enough to try on the spot. Not that any man would ever say such a thing to a woman who already has a partner to begin with. I believe we've talked about this before, but being able to take multiple wives means that a man is competent."

“But isn’t that kinda unfair?”

“I suppose you could say that, but having multiple wives means all the more responsibility. A husband who can’t afford to feed his spouse—or spouses—and children is a failure of a man. They have to give up their wives and divorce. They’re talked about behind their backs for the rest of their lives.”

“Eep, that’s scary.”

I thought it was a ticket for men to cheat and screw as many women as they wanted, but it wasn’t like that at all. It sounded like men who got too cocky would be exiled from their community.

“That also goes for men who hit on women who already have a partner or who try to take them by force. That’s why you don’t ever need to worry about that sort of thing happening.”

“But doesn’t that mean men with power are free to do whatever they want under this system?”

Men who possessed enough power that no one could defy them could still do whatever they pleased without a care for what people said behind their backs.

“Ha ha ha. That’s true. By the way, Kousuke, when do you think a man is at his most vulnerable?”

“That would be when... Oh.” I knew when. It wasn’t hard to guess.

“Do you think women would let men like that do whatever they wanted whenever they pleased? That’s what I’m saying. Think of it more like...it all comes down to stature.”

“Eek!” Now I knew why men didn’t take advantage of this system.

“That all being said, I don’t mind if you have a relationship with Ira. She’s cute and works hard for me. I think she’d be a good match for us both.”

“O-oh?”

She sounds so casual about it. But I guess that’s just how it is? Yeah.

“You can go ahead and try to make a baby with her too.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t be so blunt about it.”

“Work hard now.”

“Are you listening to me?”

It had been a while since I last got to see her smirking like that. *You’re teasing me, aren’t you? I’ll get you back for this later.*

“There’s one more thing I want to talk about. You remember when we were traveling with the harpies? Did something happen after I fell asleep?”

“Yep.”

“I see. I knew I had just misunderstood... Wait, you knew about it?!” I couldn’t help but try to make a joke out of the way Sylphy so casually confessed it.

“You see, Fronte and her friends were all so immensely curious about you. I used my spirit magic to put you into a deep sleep, and then things just happened.”

“What did you do to me?”

“Ha ha ha. Just turned you into my educational aid.”

“Educational aid?! For what?!” I tried to press her for an answer, but she just laughed before changing the subject.

“By the way, I know what you want to do about Ira, but what about the harpies? They all yearn for you too, you know?”

“I was kinda aware of that already, but I don’t know what to do. It’d be impossible to take care of all of them.”

“Nah, I’m sure you could provide for all of them. I mean, you’re already providing for every single one of us.”

“I suppose you’re right when you put it that way.”

I was pretty much the sole provider for the crops keeping the Liberation Army fed and armed. All of the houses were pretty much made by me. Our clothes were made from cloth I weaved. *I guess I am the one making all of the necessities for the army.*

“I bet that if you so wished it, you could have every single woman who has feelings for you.”

“No way. There’s not nearly enough of me to go around.” I couldn’t help but put a serious face on. In my opinion, Sylphy was more than enough for me.

She chuckled. “True.”

Ahh, Sylphy’s so pretty.

“However, it might be best if you do take the harpies under your care. When I think about what’s to come, it’d be best if you were on good terms with them. Or perhaps I should say, the harpies in the Liberation Army only have eyes for you. You might even say that you’ll be forced to take them as wives.”

“Um, what?”

“We’ll absolutely need their ability to fly in the upcoming battles. Making them yours would merely mean making the Liberation Army’s greatest assets yours. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose.”

The harpies were most definitely our trump card right now, since they could one-sidedly bomb the enemy from up high.

“Plus, we need to bring up the next generation. It works well for me too if you’re their father.”

“That’s awfully pragmatic.” I forced a smile.

Sylphy was of noble blood. In other words, Sylphy wanted to make the harpies a part of her family through me, since they were coming into such powerful leverage within the army.

“Of course, I won’t push you to do it if you don’t want to. But you like Pirna, Fronte, and the others too, right?”

“Well, yeah, I suppose I do.”

They didn’t hide their affection for me at all, and it was only natural that I liked them as well. They were all pretty too.

“I’m surprised you’re so open-minded about me having a...mistress? Concubine?” I voiced my true feelings. I knew that Sylphy loved me, but I’d assumed she was a bit more possessive than this.

However, Sylphy's reaction to those words was rather intense. She slammed her mead on the table, making a loud bang.

"Don't get the wrong idea, Kousuke."

She seized my face in both of her hands with such strength that I was forced to look her in the eyes. I was pretty sure I heard a crack in my neck. Ow. The only thing I could see now was her intense expression.

"I love you. If it were possible, I would want to keep you all to myself. I'd like it to be just the two of us forever." And then, just as her expression softened, her ears drooped. "But I understand how the others feel. I really do. That's why I'm fine with as many as you..." She trailed off, seemingly at a loss for words.

Hmm, if Sylphy's okay with it, then I guess I should follow through as best as I can? If it's her wish, then I should go along with it.

"I don't know what the right choice is," I admitted.

"Me neither."

"I guess we should just see how things go and make sure to keep talking to each other—or keep talking with everyone, I guess."

"Yeah."

It might be difficult to make everyone happy, but I was sure that we could find a way to cooperate. It seemed there was precedent for men living harmoniously with multiple partners in this world, so I'd just have to learn from their example.

"Maybe it'd be best if I talked to someone about it. How about Melty?"

Sylphy made a face at the suggestion. What was that for? "I've already talked to her about it. She's the one who suggested this whole thing."

"Oh, I see."

Now that I think about it, getting the harpies involved wasn't the kind of plan that Sylphy would typically come up with. So Melty was the mastermind behind this... I don't think I was too off the mark when I said she's the strongest among us in more ways than one.

"Next time, include me in these discussions," I said.

“Okay.”

Be that as it may, my heart was heavy. What kind of ridiculous things would she suggest next? It made me tremble with fear.

“While we’re discussing serious matters, I’d like to talk about the war.”

This was far easier to talk about, if you asked me. Arguably, I just didn’t actually feel the gravity of the situation.

“Yeah, I suppose we should.” Sylphy sobered up and gave me her full attention. Urk, there sure was a difference in interest in this matter between us.

“After talking with Sir Leonard this morning, we concluded that we’ll need to make a display of force if we’re to negotiate or ask other countries to act as intermediaries, right?”

“Yeah. Right now, we’re little more than the remnants of a rebel army. You could even call us insurgents trying to obstruct their rule. I highly doubt that they’ll want to negotiate with the likes of us.”

Sylphy went on to say she certainly wouldn’t want to bother negotiating with us if she were in their position. I supposed she had a point. We were something more akin to terrorists in their eyes. While we had our opinions and virtues, they had their own set of those as well.

“So, frankly speaking, the only way to show our strength is to kill all of their soldiers,” I said.

“That’s right. Are you against the idea?”

“I think it’d be best if we could avoid casualties, but I know it’s not that simple.”

The Holy Kingdom had conquered the Kingdom of Merinard and were firm in their effective control over it. Merinard had been theirs for twenty years now. While humans didn’t have long lives, the people who’d been young at the time were already in their forties and fifties. A good number of those involved must have died of natural causes, disease, or injury.

There was also the possibility that the current generation of citizens didn’t

feel that much of a connection to the war, and I was sure that there were people who had emigrated from the Holy Kingdom and set down roots in the new land. It wouldn't be an easy thing to reclaim the country.

"We'll need to find a point of compromise with them. Speaking of which, did we manage to contact any of the humans who once fought for the Kingdom of Merinard and went into hiding out there?"

"Now that you mention it, no one reported as much. If they're in hiding, they're probably doing it in the urban areas. Our army didn't go near any of the towns or cities, after all."

"That makes sense. Well, people will talk. I'm sure that the assault on the rock salt mines will be a hot topic, so news of it is sure to spread in time. If we want to cause gossip, it might be best if we plant it ourselves, though."

Sylphy gave me a puzzled look. "Plant it ourselves? What do you mean? Like have our spies go in undercover?"

That certainly was one way to do it. However, nearly all of the beastfolk in Merinard were enslaved, so that'd be an incredibly risky tactic.

"What if we dropped flyers from the sky? Ones that say something like, 'Sylphy has built a new land in the heart of the Great Omitt Badlands. Citizens of the Kingdom of Merinard, now is the time to mobilize.'"

"You're going to use the harpies again? Are you really that fond of them?"

"Their mobility in the sky makes them powerful, plain and simple."

Of course I liked the harpies, but that wasn't the reason I was putting them to work as much as possible. They just happened to be useful!

"But you're right; it might be a good way to make it known far and wide what our claims and intentions are. But paper is awfully expensive. I assume you're able to make a lot of it, though?" Sylphy asked.

"I've got more than enough materials."

It was easy to churn out paper using the fibers I got from the grass and weeds I had collected. It would be a pain to fill them all out by hand, but if I could craft a wood-block printer or something like that, we could easily mass-produce

flyers.

“I’ll field a proposition as soon as we arrive back at the frontline base,” I said.

“Okay.”

Just as we wrapped up that conversation, I reached for the bottle of mead to pour another glass, but I realized it was practically empty. I didn’t even notice how much we’d drunk. *Huh, now I’m noticing just how tipsy I feel. Not that I’m anywhere near my limit.*

“We out of mead?”

“Yeah. Should I bring out another bottle?” I asked.

“No, I think we’ve had enough, don’t you?” Sylphy’s smile was an invitation. It had been a while since Sylphy and I got to spend time together like this. I would put my whole heart into our lovemaking tonight.

POV: Pirna the Harpy

AFTER KOUSUKE and the princess left, the three of us slept and kept a watchful eye on the temporary fortress from the morning on, as was our assigned duty. Yesterday, we’d gotten to eat those delicious hamburgers that Kousuke had left for us, but starting today, we had to subsist off of block cookies, jerky, and dried fruits.

“Commander, do you think Kousuke will agree to be with us?” Pessa asked as she shifted her focus to the fortress.

Pessa was bubbly and a bit of a chatterbox. She was obedient, and her cheerful disposition always kept everyone’s spirits high.

“I-I sure hope so.” Flamé grinned with a faint blush on her cheeks. I bet she was imagining what things would be like if he did take us as partners.

Flamé had excellent night vision and was very perceptive. In addition, she was also adroit—probably the quietest flyer I know. She was brilliant but a bit of an introvert with a rich imagination... Basically, she always had some filthy notion

brewing in the back of her head.

The feathers on her head stood on end, moving up and down, making her look like some kind of wolf or cat beastfolk. It was easy to tell when her thoughts ventured deep into the wild side.

“According to Fronte, Her Highness is in favor of Kousuke having a relationship with us, and Kousuke seems interested in us too, so I bet it’ll be fine.”

They had said that after some begging, the princess had put Kousuke to sleep using dark magic and let them do all kinds of “experiments” with him. When I had first heard about that, I was so angry about having missed out that I nearly went on a rampage. But after that, we got to enjoy a bath with him. *Hee hee hee. He was so adorable.*

Kousuke never called us turd birds; if anything, he gave us important jobs and equal power. At first, we had only casually asked him to make weapons we could use, but the weapon he came up with far surpassed anything we could have dreamed of.

“Kousuke’s such a good catch,” Flamé murmured as she touched a wing to her cheek with a spellbound look on her face.

He was a very mysterious man. He had hair as black as the night sky, black eyes, and incredible powers, and he was chock-full of weapons and tools we’d never seen or heard of before. That didn’t even touch on all his good ideas about cooking.

He was diligent, amiable, and sincere. There was something about him that seemed inexperienced with women. However, he also had a side of him that was valiant enough to face gizmas head-on. *Ahh, I’m nothing like Flamé, but now I miss him.*

No, no. Stop it, Pirna. I’m in the middle of a very important mission. Lookout duty is boring, but I mustn’t shirk my duties. I don’t want to disappoint Kousuke.

“I totally agree with you, but we must prioritize our mission.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like we have anything better to do.”

“But still. We don’t want to disappoint Kousuke, right?”

“T-true.”

We couldn’t afford to be discovered by the Holy Kingdom, so it wasn’t like we could track their movements from the skies. That was why we had decided to keep watch on the temporary fortress from this lookout post.

Although we didn’t see anything at first, we spotted the Holy Kingdom’s army near the temporary fortress about two hours in. They were surrounding it, on guard against attacks from the fortress. As soon as they figured out that no one was there, the infantrymen slowly closed the distance, shields at the ready.

“I don’t see any siege weapons.”

“Since we were still pretty far from the fortress when we drove them back, it could be that they hadn’t noticed it yet.”

The Holy Kingdom’s army had been in a state of turmoil because of our bombing. We probably hadn’t even given them the chance to realize it was there. And it’s not like we left that many survivors.

“Oh, they grabbed the sign.”

“It looks like they’re taking it to their commander.”

We had left a sign posted at the temporary fortress’s gate with the Liberation Army’s demands and warnings. Our demands were the return of the Kingdom of Merinard, the withdrawal of the Holy Kingdom’s army and their citizens, and the liberation of Merinard’s people. The warnings stated that the invasion of this fortress would be seen as a hostile act and a declaration of war. Not so much a warning as a formal diplomatic statement.

The person who must have been their commander read the sign, threw it to the ground, and stomped on it.

“Aww, what a mean thing to do.”

“I suppose it’s the only natural thing to do from their standpoint.”

It seemed that the army hadn’t brought ladders or anything of the like. The gates were locked up tight, so they were deliberating on how to invade. They could try to climb it, but the walls had nothing they could start from and it was

at a slight angle, so it'd be difficult.

After much distress, they decided to scale the walls with an impromptu grappling hook. You'd think there'd be an easier way if only they had someone who could use wind magic, but maybe they didn't have one among their numbers.

"It looks like they don't have any mages?"

"I-I don't see anyone who looks like a mage either."

"They must have decided that they didn't need any."

Their unit of mages was a valuable resource among their army. It might just have been that they didn't want to bother dispatching them all the way to the borderlands.

Once they got in, it didn't take them long to gain complete control of the fortress. They opened the gates, and the troops streamed in. The only things left inside the fortress were some food and furniture. Kousuke made it so there was no trace of the infinite watering hole, and we'd thrown dirt and poison into the wells to hide their uncanniness. He had only just dug these wells anyway, so I wouldn't have been surprised if the water was muddy and undrinkable to begin with.

Their cavalry went after the footprints left by Sir Leonard and the others, but I doubted they'd be able to catch up to Kousuke's group. There was always the danger of being attacked by gizmas, so I was sure that they couldn't follow them too far.

After a short time, they returned. Their soldiers were investigating inside and outside the perimeter of the fortress, but they showed no sign of forming up to march. It looked like they were planning to stay there today. They were probably feeling satisfied with themselves for claiming a fortress of such clear strategic utility without any injuries.

And that would be their fatal mistake.

Events passed uneventfully as day turned into night. They couldn't fit their full complement inside the fortress, so they decided to make a battle formation around it. They dug trenches until sunset and made embankments to prepare

themselves against gizma attacks. Their campfires burned brightly.

“Do you really think it’s going to blow up?”

“I don’t think Kousuke would mess this up.”

“Y-yeah, he—”

Before Flamé could finish her sentence, it happened.

At first there was a flash, and then a pillar of flame burst forth from the earth. Then came the impact and a thunderous roar that pierced our eardrums. It wasn’t just one explosion either, but a chain of them. Every time, it felt like my chest was being beaten in the wake of the piercing boom.

All three of us were overwhelmed by the spectacle. Once the explosions started, it was over quickly, but it felt like we had been watching for a very long time.

“W-wow...”

“Oh my... There isn’t a single trace left.”

“That was even more incredible than you predicted, Kousuke...”

Flamé was right: there was literally nothing left of the fortress now. All that remained was the ground gouged out by the explosion, debris from the fortress, and the broken remains of the Holy Kingdom’s army spread out around it. Kousuke had said that the army outside the fortress might not be all that hurt by it, but from what I could see, there wasn’t a single uninjured soldier.

“Uh, sooo...wh-what should we do, Commander?”

“Flamé, you go do reconnaissance under the cover of night like we planned. Be careful to avoid detection, and fly out of their archers’ range. I doubt it’ll be an issue, but we can’t drop our guard completely,” I said.

“O-okaaay...” Flamé took flight from the entrance in near total silence.

She always acted like she had no confidence in herself, but she truly was good at what she did. I wished she would show a little pride in her abilities.

“Commander Pirna, Kousuke truly is amazing, isn’t he?” Even the usually cheerful Pessa had a nervous tone to her voice. I was sure that anyone would

react the same way, witnessing what we just did. It was as if a god had upended their wrath upon the earth.

“That barely even begins to describe it.”

Just how much damage did we do to their army? I was sure that, at the very least, the soldiers who had been inside the fortress had not survived. Nothing mortal could have survived that.

After a short time, Flamé returned. It must have been a gruesome sight; her face was quite pale.

“Well?” I asked.

“Th-there’s no trace of the fortress, and less than 20 percent of their soldiers remain.”

“So they were practically wiped out.” Of that fifth, just how many could move normally?

“The Holy Kingdom has lost their combat ability.”

“Yees, I’d say so.”

“What do we do now?”

“We’ll all double-check in the morning, blow this place up, and then head home. Tonight, let’s take turns keeping watch and get some sleep.”

Pessa responded with an affirmative and took the first watch. Flamé would take the second watch, and I would take last. I was sure that we’d be reunited with Kousuke sometime tomorrow. We had to relay our report, after all.

The day after my long-awaited night of indulging in Sylphy’s company, I cleaned myself up and demolished the floating house. We reconvened with Sir Leonard and the others, then started breakfast. Today, we were having savory oat porridge with meat and vegetables with a galik gizma stir fry. The porridge was easy to make but not entirely filling, so the extra meat would make up for it.

“Our detonation is supposed to happen tonight. I wonder how it’ll go.”

“I highly doubt that the enemy will pursue us too far. These are the Great Omitt Badlands, after all. Even if they sent only their cavalrymen after us, they’d need to return to a safe shelter to sleep lest they risk becoming gizma bait. I believe that, if necessary, they will fortify themselves around the perimeter of the fortress,” Sir Leonard replied.

“That makes sense.”

“I’m having the wind spirits erase our tracks as we go. They won’t be able to follow so easily.” Sylphy had been using her spirit magic to blow away our prints as we went along. It was extremely useful magic here in the dry wastes.

“Shall we head out to the third shelter as soon as we’re done eating?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Sylphy said.

“So we shall,” Sir Leonard agreed.

Nothing worth mentioning happened along the way to the third shelter. We ran into some gizmas, but Sir Leonard slayed them in the blink of an eye. He sure was lethal with those twin fangs of his. He sliced right through the gizmas’ carapace like it was paper.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! I’ll cut you to pieces!” The lion man was in high spirits. He looked like he was casually going about it, but I could tell that his execution was good—he was thinking about how best to dismantle them in a way that kept the useful parts intact.



We arrived at the third shelter with time to spare, so we started thinking up the design for the public bathhouse. I had been imagining it like the public bathhouses we had back in Japan, but when I took everyone else's opinions into consideration...

"Sounds like something straight out of *Thermae Romae*."

"Thermay what now?"

"Uh, never mind."

I had come up with the idea for changing rooms and bathing rooms separated by gender, but some suggested there should be an exercise area or a lounge for relaxed chats. That then turned into the idea of making those places warm as well, so I came up with the idea of using the hot water plumbing to supply the heat. Then came suggestions for drinks, light meals, and so on, and the whole thing turned into what I could only imagine was something more like a Roman bathhouse. It would take quite a lot of people to operate that kind of place, but it would probably work, right?

"It is important to create jobs for people as well," Sir Leonard pointed out.

"Yeah, we'll have tons of people fit to work," Sylphy agreed.

"You bring up a good point."

We had drastically increased our labor pool. Not everybody could become soldiers, after all. They'd need some way to stay busy. Speaking of which, we didn't have a heat source that could heat just water, so unfortunately, we didn't have a hot bath for ourselves that night. I didn't have nearly enough hot water in my inventory to fill this bathhouse we had come up with. *Give me sad looks all you want, but I can't do the impossible. You'll have to make do with cold-water baths.*

After dinner, we all gazed out in the direction of the temporary fortress, since we were pretty sure it'd be exploding soon.

"Do you think it'll work?" Sylphy asked me.

"I hid the fuse behind some blocks after I turned it on. There's no way they'll be able to stop it, and they have no idea how dangerous the explosive blocks

are.”

“Oh, yeah? So you’re pretty confident about it.”

“I dunno if I’d call it that or—”

Right then, there was a flash of light in the distance. The soldiers of the Liberation Army oohed in admiration. There were flashes again and again, and then the delayed, thunderous *booms*. I was pretty sure we were about 60 kilometers away; the explosion seemed a lot more intense than I had imagined.

I casually checked my achievements.

Lady-killer——: On good terms with over 20 people of the opposite sex. Nice boat. *Attacks against the opposite sex are increased by 10%.

My First Murder——: Killed a human for the first time. You murderer. *Attacks against humans are increased by 5%.

Tough Guy——: Reached level 20. That’s like the level of the leading actor in an action movie. *Physical abilities are increased by 50%.

Assassin——: Killed 100 people without them even knowing it was coming. Now you’re an undeniable assassin. *Unlocks the takedown function.

Bombing Fiend——: Defeated 100 creatures using explosives. Boom. It’s fun, isn’t it? *Damage inflicted by explosives is increased by 10%.

Mass Murderer——: Killed over 1,000 humans at once. Good going! *Attacks against humans are increased by 10%.

Hero——: Killed 3,000 humans all by yourself. That just makes you a murderer, though, doesn’t it? *All abilities of allies within a radius of 100 meters are increased by 10% and their affection is easier to raise.

Enough with the comments! The hell are you trying to get at with “nice boat”?! Just stop it already! It’s not funny! But wait, I’m level 20 now? The last time I looked, I was only level 12. Whoa, I’m actually level 22. And I’ve got 10 skill points to spend too. I’d better pick some out later.

Speaking of which, the numbers in the Hero achievement are kind of wild. How does it determine who my allies are? And isn't that 50 percent increase a bit overpowered? Like they're wearing some kind of invisible armor now? Dang, my health and stamina were at 120 each before, but now they're 180. Will the final value be some kind of multiple of that?

"What's wrong, Kousuke? Why do you have that look on your face?"

"It's just, uh, it seems that explosion wiped out three thousand people just now."

"What? Really? How do you know that?"

"Um, well, now that I think about it, I never told you about skills and achievements, did I?" I gave Sylphy a brief explanation, except it wasn't. It took a lot of effort to describe, let alone explain. "Basically, uh...I think there's probably some mysterious being watching what I do, and when I satisfy their defined conditions, they give that condition a name and increase my powers based on it."

"A god is granting you powers based on what you do?"

"Yeah, I guess that's close enough. By killing our enemies, or probably any living creatures, I get points for what I've achieved and I can pick which of my abilities I want to improve."

"So you gain power by offering sacrifices to the god?"

"Something like that, although I don't know for sure if they're a god or not."

I had no idea how hard it would be to explain levels, skills, and points to someone who had no concept of game terms. There was a glint in everyone else's eye as they listened in on our conversation.

"Fabled Visitors are disciples of a god?"

"Which god, though? The God of Smithing?"

"No, surely the God of Food."

"It could be the God of War."

"There's so many things he can do. It's gotta be the God of Chaos."

“Yeah.” There was a loud chorus of agreement on that point.

Upon asking what kind of god he was, I learned that he loved to play tricks, would suddenly toss people into unknown lands, test them, and guide them to unfortunate fates. He was powerful even among the gods and freely gave power to those who overcame his tests.

Huh. That does sound like what I’m going through. I see. So, you’re the God of Chaos, then. One of these days, your face will be meeting my fist, I swear. Just you wait.

Once we were done getting over our excitement, all that was left was to sleep. The explosion was far off in the distance, so it wasn’t like we could do anything there. I set up a floating house for Sylphy and me so we could enjoy some alone time. We had never been apart for so long before; one night hadn’t been enough to make up for lost time.

Actually, the fact that I had killed three thousand-odd people all at once kind of scared me, and I longed for her warmth. I completely forgot about it as Sylphy stroked my head, and I fell fast asleep.

The next day, Pirna and the other two harpies caught up to us just past noon as we were heading to the second shelter. We hadn’t heard the sound of the lookout post being blown up, but they said they’d done it.

We learned from the three of them about what had happened when the fortress exploded. Out of their army of five and a half thousand people, there were less than a hundred survivors. The fortress had been blown to smithereens, and the army encamping around its perimeter had taken devastating damage. It wasn’t clear how they had all died, but it was a grisly sight with the majority of the corpses missing limbs or more. Only a fortunate few had managed to survive.

“And then the gizmas came just after midnight...”

“Y-yeah...”

The gizmas had devoured the dead and wounded in a feast straight from hell. The majority of the wounded had died by morning, while those who were still

alive retreated in the direction of the Holy Kingdom's fortress as soon as dawn broke. The harpies saw gizmas pursue them as well, so we had to wonder just how many managed to make it back.

"They were completely annihilated, then. I never could have imagined that Kousuke's power was this incredible," Sir Leonard said.

"You and me both, bud."

The power of explosive blocks was not to be underestimated. I would have to be more careful with them from now on.

After Pirna and the other two harpies finished giving their report, we continued on our way to the second shelter and arrived without issue. I made a floating house like usual, then used the golem communicator to update the frontline base.

"Is it true?" Ira asked.

"I think so. Pirna and her team confirmed as much, so I've got no reason to question it."

"I see. Are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"You killed a lot of people. Do you regret it?"

"I'm fine. Probably because I wasn't there to see it personally. We were two days' walk away, after all."

"I see. I'll take good care of you as soon as you get back. Be careful on your way home."

"Th-thanks."

Sylphy's glare could kill! The call was over, but her glare remained!

"Do you *want* Ira to take good care of you?" she asked.

"Uhhh, I dunno." I tried to imagine a little lady like Ira fawning over me. I had no idea what Ira's idea of taking good care of me was, but it had to be something like caressing me and stroking my head, right? That actually didn't sound so bad. "I guess I'd like it."

“I see. Do you want *me* to take good care of you?”

“Yes, please.”

And boy howdy did she take care of me. But it kinda felt as if she was treating me like a baby, if anything. *You’re starting to head into dangerous territory.* I got back at her by treating her the same way.

“Y-y’know...”

“Yeah?”

“Th-this isn’t so bad?”

“Y-yeah. I guess so.”

I was reminded that Sylphy was still considered a youngster among elves. I didn’t think anyone could ever surpass how adorable she was when she was acting like a needy child.

The next morning, Sylphy had sobered up and wrapped herself up in the blankets like some kind of bagworm; it took me a while to coax her out. Sir Leonard asked why we were late, but I kept my silence for the sake of Sylphy’s honor.

“Kousuke, learn some moderation. It wouldn’t do to put a burden on the princess’s body,” Sir Leonard scolded.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. I don’t think it burdened her mentally, either.”

“What in the world were you two doing?”

“Sorry, can’t tell.”

The ladies gave me pointed looks. *You’ve got it all wrong! I was only doing what Sylphy wanted! She just wound up self-destructing afterward!*

“Y-you like it pretty rough, then?”

“I prefer a gentler approach.”

“I-I wouldn’t mind...”

And now we’ve got the harpies acting like this, Sylphy! Come back to us

soooooon!

Once Sylphy finally got out of bed, several women—including the harpies—dragged her off in a flurry of whispers while I was demolishing the floating house. It was important to recycle resources, after all. Why didn't I just leave it, you ask? Well, the Holy Kingdom's scouts would've known the location of the shelter.

By the time they finished their secret conference, Sylphy's face was red to her ears, and the ladies were giving her sympathetic looks. They found out exactly what happened. Was I to be publicly executed, then?

"Kousuke is innocent in this matter."

"He's innocent."

"Agreed."

"I-I agree he's innocent."

Woot. Sylphy was blushing and trembling.

"Urgh, agh, ahhhh!"

"Oh nooo! Sylphy's lost it!"

Sylphy started lashing out, so we all fled in the direction of the first shelter. I wasn't sure if it was good or not that we let her catch up to us.

"Huff... Huff..."

"Haah... Haah..."

"Are you okay?"

"Are you all right?"

The harpies and I were the only ones still in good form by the time we arrived at the first shelter. It was all thanks to Heart Healthy. The harpies had all taken to the skies, so they just flew the whole way.

"You sure are tough, Kousuke."

"Only when it comes to running."

I could probably run even faster and for longer if I took the right skill. Once I was done taking some skills related to crafting, perhaps I would benefit from increasing Fleet-Footed or Heart Healthy. I had a feeling that improving my mobility would be pretty useful later.

Night came at the first shelter. I built another floating house so Sylphy and I could be alone, but...

“Sylphy?”

My mistress was keeping a slight distance between us, perhaps because she had learned the hard way about her mistake. She hissed at me when I tried to get too close, so I gave up on that. We sat at separate ends of the couch, watching and waiting for the other to make a move. I made it look like I was just staring out into space as I perused my skill list.

Skilled Worker——: Crafting time is reduced by 20%.

Dismantler——: The number of materials acquired when disassembling a crafted item is increased by 10%.

Repairman——: The time to repair items is reduced by 20% and the cost of materials is reduced by 20%.

Mass-Producer——: When you make more than ten of the same item, the number of required materials is reduced by 10%.

Logger——: Number of plant materials obtained is increased by 20%.

Miner II——: Number of minerals obtained is increased by 40%.

Anatomist——: Number of materials obtained from bodies is increased by 20%.

Creator——: Lowers the difficulty level for item creation.

Heart Healthy——: Stamina recovery speed is increased by 20%.

Fleet-Footed——: Movement speed is increased by 10%.

Strong Arm——: Attacks with melee weapons are increased by 20%.

Sharpshooter——: Attacks with ranged weapons are increased by 20%.

Iron Skin——: Damage taken is reduced by 20%.

Survivor——: Health is increased by 10% and Health recovery speed is increased by 20%.

Medic——: Effects of recovery items are increased by 20%.

Reptilian Stomach——: Hunger reduction speed is reduced by 20%.

Camel Hump——: Thirst reduction speed is reduced by 20%.

At present, the ones I didn't need were Reptilian Stomach and Camel Hump. I didn't need Dismantler either. I could probably skip Repairman too.

The best ones were simply the ones that would increase my resource output: Logger, Miner, Anatomist, and Mass-Producer since I had been crafting a lot of the same things at once recently. It didn't seem like I could increase Creator's skill level.

As far as battle skills went, Sharpshooter was the only possible choice. Melee was just not for me. That coupled with raising Fleet-Footed and Heart Healthy meant that I could stay completely out of the enemy's range.

However, I have 10 skill points to use, so if I'm only raising skill levels, then I can do five max. Logger, Anatomist, and Mass-Producer are sure choices, and then Sharpshooter—no, wait, I doubt I'll actually be fighting all that much from now on. I can compensate for my offensive abilities with the weapons I use. I should probably increase Fleet-Footed and Heart Healthy, then.

Skilled Worker——: Crafting time is reduced by 20%.

Dismantler——: The number of materials acquired when disassembling a crafted item is increased by 10%.

Repairman——: The time to repair items is reduced by 20% and the cost of materials is reduced by 20%.

Mass-Producer II——: When you make more than ten of the same item, the number of required materials is reduced by 10%. The cost is reduced by 20%

when you make 100 or more.

Logger II—: Number of plant materials obtained is increased by 40%.

Miner II—: Number of minerals obtained is increased by 40%.

Anatomist II—: Number of materials obtained from bodies is increased by 40%.

Creator—: Lowers the difficulty level for item creation.

Heart Healthy II—: Stamina recovery speed is increased by 40%.

Fleet-Footed II—: Movement speed is increased by 20%.

Strong Arm—: Attacks with melee weapons are increased by 20%.

Sharpshooter—: Attacks with ranged weapons are increased by 20%.

Iron Skin—: Damage taken is reduced by 20%.

Survivor—: Health is increased by 10% and Health recovery speed is increased by 20%.

Medic—: Effects of recovery items are increased by 20%.

Reptilian Stomach—: Hunger reduction speed is reduced by 20%.

Camel Hump—: Thirst reduction speed is reduced by 20%.

And now I was out of skill points. I kind of wanted Survivor and Medic, but those were more suited for combat situations. Had I never met Sylphy and everyone else and was trying to survive solo, then I probably would have wanted to take those.

I was all done picking out skills, but Sylphy was still looking away from me in silence. However, she had gotten a bit closer to me. She must have done it while I was staring out into space. She was just too adorable; I couldn't stand it.

After a night of doing my best to raise my oh-so-adorable Sylphy's spirits, dawn came.

We managed to arrive at the frontline base while the sun was still high in the

sky. Ira must have already told everyone about how we had defeated the soldiers because we received a particularly exuberant welcome.

“I am glad to see you all made it back,” Danan said. He had remained behind to command the base. Ira was right next to him.

“Yeah, all thanks to Kousuke. Do you have anything to report?” Sylphy asked.

“Yes, all kinds of things happened. A meal is on the way, so how about we discuss this in the conference room?” Danan suggested.

“Very well. Let’s go,” Sylphy said.

“Okie-dokie,” I replied.

“Very well,” Sir Leonard said.

“Coming!” Pirna chirped.

We all headed to the conference room. Ira stood at my side and surreptitiously clung to the hem of my clothes. When I glanced at her, she was wearing a slight smile on her usually deadpan face.

“What is it?” she asked me.

“Uh, nothing.” I had accidentally writhed a little because of how sweet and downright lovely she was, but I managed to cover it up somehow. What an adorable creature.

I was still squirming internally as we arrived at the conference room. I took my seat next to Sylphy, who had sat down already. Ira sat next to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and Pirna sat next to her. Danan and Sir Leonard sat in the seats opposite us. It felt like there was some kind of bias in this seating arrangement, but I was just gonna not dwell on that feeling. Nope.

“So, where shall we begin? Shall we start from what happened at the fortress?” Danan asked.

“That’s a good idea,” Sylphy said. “Pirna?”

“Five and a half thousand soldiers from the Holy Kingdom’s army had closed in on the temporary fortress, but they were pretty much annihilated overnight

thanks to the trap Kousuke set. By the following morning, there were only 72 soldiers left to retreat by foot.”

“And the rest?” Danan pressed.

“Many were blown to bits, most corpses had grievous injuries, and some survivors were devoured by the gizmas that had appeared late at night, so it was difficult to accurately count their dead.”

“I see. We’ll have to factor vanquishing the gizmas into our plans, then.”

“Indeed. There will likely be another explosive increase in their numbers,” Sir Leonard said.

“What about taking care of the remaining corpses?”

“The gizmas will surely do the work for us if we leave them to it. The question is whether that’ll lead to a third population explosion,” Sylphy said.

“Ah.”

It would certainly be annoying if a large army of gizmas attacked us again. They would get in the way of our liberation squads carrying out missions at the border.

“By the way, just how big of a blow to the Holy Kingdom was losing that army?” I asked.

“As of three years ago, there were approximately twelve to fifteen thousand soldiers stationed in the Kingdom of Merinard. Working from the cumulative casualties of all our battles, I believe that we have wiped out approximately half of the occupation force,” Danan answered.

“We don’t know what their current numbers are, so that’s just a guess. But I doubt that they would have greatly increased their headcount since they last crushed our uprising. It is likely that this will be a blow big enough to damage their effective control over the territory,” Sir Leonard added.

“So we did a lot of damage?” I asked.

“I believe so. So long as the imperial core does not commit to a troop surge, I doubt that they will be able to close in on us with a large army. This makes things considerably easier for us,” Sir Leonard said.

Huh. This was a much bigger victory than I thought.

“How are the liberated citizens doing?” I asked.

“The majority of them have been moved to our home base. We plan to let them rest and recover there before making work assignments. Those who wish it shall be trained and join us on the battlefield,” Danan replied.

“The majority of them, you say?”

“Yes, about a hundred of them have military experience or were previously adventurers, so they requested to remain here and serve. They’re being trained as we speak. The rest are too badly injured to work.”

“I see. I’ll go ahead and treat them tomorrow.” I nodded as I weighed in, since Danan had looked at me. He had probably kept them here so that I would do as much. I could fix up just about everybody except the amputees.

Be that as it may, a hundred people with military experience and ex-adventurers... That reminded me, there were a lot of male soldiers carrying weapons. As we had a shortage of men, this would likely make things a bit easier for us. I wondered if Sykes was little more than a husk now. I worried for him.

“I’m sure that Melty is handling the management of the people sent to the home base smoothly. She would’ve contacted us with the golem communicator if there were anything wrong, right?” I asked.

“I’d assume so. We have already established communications with home base,” Ira said.

“I’ll try making contact myself tomorrow just in case,” Sylphy added.

“Please do. I am sure Melty misses you; it’s been too long since she saw you last,” Danan told her.

“That’s true. It might be good if Melty and I have a nice long talk,” Sylphy said with a smile. At first, people had been amazed to see her natural smile, but they seemed used to it now. *Just how long did you go without showing that off, Sylphy?*

“Oh, yeah, Kousuke had an interesting idea. Kousuke, tell him,” Sylphy said.

“Now? All right.”

I gave them the breakdown of my plan to rig up radio infrastructure using the golem communicators. I only had the idea to offer; so Ira and the research and development team would have to deal with the technical end.

“Indeed, it won’t be too huge a challenge to implement. It should be easy enough to transmit magical waves using the magic of the ley lines in the home base. We’re also proceeding well with the development of the relays,” Ira replied.

“Hmm, yes, it’s a good idea. Ideas that can bring peace of mind and soothe the citizens are wonderful,” Sir Leonard said.

“Yeah, I bet it could be used for all kinds of things.”

They all were in favor. The problem was with my next proposal.

“I’ll mass-produce paper, and we’ll use wood blocks to mass-produce fliers that we’ll scatter around the major towns. That way we can quickly circulate our message within Merinard. I think they’ll also be able to guide people to the badlands.”

Ira shook her head. “That won’t work.”

“She’s right. I doubt it will be effective,” Sir Leonard said.

“Agreed. You most likely wouldn’t succeed.” Danan made three.

What’s with the unanimous veto?

“I didn’t think it was a bad idea.” Even Sylphy was confused by this. I agreed; I thought it was a decent enough proposition.

Ira went on to say, “Your Highness, Kousuke—you assume you are working with a literate audience.”

“That is correct. I am sure that the literacy rate has dropped even further among the commoners these past twenty years,” Sir Leonard added.

“Public education has withered in Merinard under the Holy Kingdom,” Danan said.

As an otherworlder and a princess raised in the elven village, we’d never even

considered the idea that commoners in this world were often illiterate.

“Well, let’s forget that tactic,” I said after a moment.

“Yeah.” Sylphy was hesitant but in agreement.

I guess I should be happy that they seem on board with the radio broadcast idea. Once we’ve liberated the kingdom, we’ll have to deal with the education crisis for sure.

We spent the night at the frontline base, and I spent the next morning doing my “Kousuke, the man with the healing hands” routine.

“Whooooa?! M-my leg is straight again?!”

“My aching knee?!”

“Even after the tendons were cut, I can move my fingers?!”

“I can fight again!”

Nothing could match the splint. One little stick of wood and cloth could heal people with broken bones, limbs, and wounded hands—anything short of a lost limb.

“It’s still so strange, no matter how many times I see it,” Sir Leonard said with astonishment. He was here to be my guard just in case. He’d been on the receiving end of my care once before.

As always, the initial skeptics looked at me with reverence after I had treated two or three people. *Ha ha ha. Yes, revere me more.*

I was done treating everyone in less than an hour. Delighted and feeling whole again, people bounced around and zipped throughout the spot we’d picked for treatments. Others started swinging practice weapons or just marveling at the whole situation.

“Everyone looks so much more cheerful now,” I commented.

“I was also that excited when I was once again able to move the way I used to. I would wager that when the ugly necessities of this war are done with, this is the end your powers will serve,” Sir Leonard said.

“Yeah, you might be right.”

It certainly would be ideal to use my powers for helping people live. Still, it was tough to live from day to day with people out there actively trying to kill you. I had no idea what the entity responsible for bringing me into this world was hoping for, but all I could do was keep on going in my own way.

I handed off my patients to Danan, since he was in command at the base, and headed down to R&D. We had a lot of things to work on: developing the golem communicators for additional purposes, making radio broadcasts a reality, and creating magical sources of power.

“Welcome,” Ira said.

“Hey, folks. Long time no see.”

“It has been a while.”

“So it has.”

“Nice to see ya again.”

I looked around, but Sykes was nowhere to be found. *D-don't tell me...*

“Where's Sykes?”

Everyone averted their eyes at my question. *Uh, guys?*

“He's sleeping; he's not feeling so well.”

“Wow, are you guys merciless or what?” I said.

“Ha ha ha.”

This is no laughing matter if you ask me. Is this the future that awaits me too? I'm scared... So scared, I'm trembling in my boots. But Ira shouldn't be so bad, right?

“We've given him medicine, so he should be okay,” one lady said after misinterpreting my gaze.

Will he really be okay with medicine alone? It'll be no joke if he's too worn down and sucked dry to get anything done; y'all might kill him.

“Um, okay. Let's just change the subject. Yeah.” This conversation was leading nowhere. *Sorry, Sykes. You were a good man.* “So, uh, which projects made progress while I was away?”

“You mean the projects for the magical wave relay, golem power, magic guns, magic sword mass production, and the crystallization of the node’s magic?”

The last three were news to me. I had given everyone information about my guns in case it could be of use to them, and I was amazed to learn that they had begun developing magic guns from that baseline.

“We’ve based the designs of our magic guns on your bolt-action rifles. We’re looking for a way to shoot magical bullets, right?”

“That’s right. We’re currently experimenting with different firing mechanisms that use fire magic, wind magic, or both. Right now, we’re tackling the issue of how each method loses range to blowback.”

The lamia blacksmith and the mouse beastfolk mage showed me the blueprint for the gun.

Hmm, this definitely looks to be inspired by the bolt-action rifle, but perhaps they’d be better served using a muzzleloader for reference instead?

“If this is how it works, then I think I might know a better kind of gun to use for reference instead. I’ll make a number of them and give them to you tomorrow. As for what kind of gun it is...”

I explained the mechanism for muzzleloaders to the best of my knowledge, including how you didn’t need to stuff gunpowder into them, and how—so long as you shoved a bullet into the chamber—you’d be able to reload at about the same speed as a crossbow and then fire it by setting off magic inside of the barrel. If the bullets and the barrel of the gun were well made, I doubted they needed to worry about blowback, so they’d only need to get the firing mechanism and the structural integrity of the gun down.

“Ah, that does sound much simpler.”

“We shall try to come up with a new design based on this method.”

Tonight, I would make a sample muzzleloading rifle and bullets to give them tomorrow. Next up on the list, magic swords.

“The mass production of magic swords and crystallization of the magic from the node are projects in progress at the home base.”

“Is that technically possible?”

“We have come up with a mock-up of a mechanism that can draw out and collect the node’s magic by analyzing the barrier device. We’re also developing a mechanism that can simultaneously crystallize magic and turn finished iron and steel weapons into magicked iron and magicked steel through continuous thaumaturgical bombardment.”

“If we manage to make it work, then we will most certainly be able to move ahead with all kinds of things. If we can mass-produce magicked iron and steel, that alone will boost the entire Liberation Army’s power.”

Weapons made of magicked iron and steel were more durable and kept their edge longer than normal ones. Armor made of the same stuff would have an increased resistance to magic. I doubted I could help with that kind of project.

But wait a minute. In that one survival game in the world made of blocks, you can enchant equipment with all kinds of effects. There was an achievement for being a fantasy blacksmith too. It stands to reason that my abilities themselves might work with magical elements. Maybe I can show off my powers by preparing magical materials for crafting and building?

At present, I didn’t see any workbenches for that sort of thing in the crafting menu, but I had reason to assume that something like that would be added to my crafting list if I just put them in my inventory.

“Hey, I have an idea. Would you mind giving me our lineup of magical materials? It doesn’t have to be that many,” I said.

“Hmm? Why?”

“There’s just something I want to test really quick.” I told everyone, including Ira, about what I was thinking.

I was able to handle mithril and its alloys even though they didn’t exist in the world I came from, so there was a chance that I could make something like a workbench for the creation of such magical items. If I could make such a workbench, then I might be able to craft something useful.

“Interesting,” Ira said.

“Your powers are so versatile. It certainly seems possible.”

“I think it would be worth a shot. If he does manage to make something that way, then we might be able to take the technology from that product.”

“Hm, then let’s give it a whirl. I’m interested to see what kind of magical items you’ll make.”

Everyone seemed on board with my suggestion. They would all bring what materials they had tomorrow and we’d experiment. *Hmm, the possibility of making a new workbench? I’m looking forward to it.*

After the meeting with R&D, I had some time to myself. It wasn’t yet afternoon, but I didn’t have any other jobs to do or people I needed to talk to. We probably wouldn’t have to worry about gizmas and the Holy Kingdom for the time being, and we had plenty of food and military supplies stockpiled.

We had more laborers producing things now, so it would be best to let the members of the Liberation Army make everything they could so that they’d have jobs to do, while I made things only I could make.

With my free time, I decided to develop new items for the first time in a while. I’d also work to better understand my powers.

Sylphy met up with me after her meeting with Danan, and Sir Leonard came along with her to act as my guard.

“I’m thinking of trying to make miso and soy sauce.”

“Miso and soy sauce,” Sylphy repeated.

“I can’t even begin to imagine what those must be from the names alone,” Sir Leonard said.

Together, we all headed to the storehouse where we kept our food reserves. I wanted to look for beans that looked like viable ingredients.

“It’d be nice if there was something like soybeans.”

“What kind of beans are soybeans?” Sir Leonard asked me.

“They’re beans that grow inside of a hull; they’re spherical and about the size

of my pinky. We don't usually eat them as is. When they're not ripened, they taste good if you boil them with salt. They have all kinds of uses and ways to prepare them after you boil them."

"Hmm, that sounds pretty similar to oil beans."

"Yeah, I agree," Sylphy said.

"Oil beans," I repeated.

"I believe we are growing them here to extract the oil from them. They keep well and could potentially be eaten if we boiled them, so I believe there must be some in storage," Sir Leonard said.

At the storehouse, we received a ten-kilogram bag of oil beans, a large quantity of salt, and three kilograms each of wheat and barley that hadn't been milled yet.

"Will this be enough for ingredients?" Sylphy asked.

"We're gonna boil these, smash them, mix them together, and then ferment them," I explained.

The first thing to try to make would be miso. The koji mold would be the bottleneck for this endeavor, but surely I could figure it out with my handy-dandy crafting powers. Skipping the fermenting with koji mold seemed a whole lot easier than turning gizma meat into something more akin to beef.

"The question is, what kind of crafting workbench should I use for this?"

I doubted my smithing station would cut it. I wouldn't say the improved workbench was completely out of the question, but it didn't seem like the right fit. And the cooking counter and brewing bench seemed dubious.

I tossed all of the ingredients into my inventory and then checked the crafting menus for the cooking counter and brewing bench.

Roasted Soy Flour—Materials: Soybean × 2

Soy Milk—Materials: Soybean × 2, Water × 2

I found roasted soy flour and soy milk in the cooking counter's crafting menu. Roasted soy flour wasn't good on its own, though. I needed mochi too. But with soy milk, I could probably process that into tofu. For now, I decided to go ahead and make both.

"What are these?" Sir Leonard asked me.

"Roasted soy flour and soy milk. One's flour made of ground roasted soybeans, and the other is like a juice made from boiled, smashed, squeezed, and strained soybeans. They're highly nutritious."

"This flour has a pleasant scent. I get the feeling it could be used in lots of recipes," Sylphy said.

"This thing called soy milk has a bit of a grassy smell to it. It certainly *seems* nutritious," Sir Leonard observed.

They'd reached for what I made without hesitation, which kinda surprised me.

"The roasted soy flour is used in a lot of confections. We have a food called mochi, which is smashed grain that's then kneaded and made really soft. We sprinkle roasted soy flour mixed with sugar on it or drizzle honey on top with the flour. Plenty of food can be prepared with soy milk too."

But I still didn't have any miso. I checked the brewing bench just in case, but I didn't see anything that sounded like miso there either.

"Hmm... I can't make it even though I'm pretty sure I have all of the ingredients."

Does this mean that the workbenches I have won't work? I can't get it to appear using item creation by imagining it either. In which case, this must mean that I need a specialized kind of crafting table for making it.

Equipment for fermenting and maturing ingredients... Like a cask for brewing? I feel like it'd work on the brewing bench too though, since I can make alcohol with it. But fine, a cask. I'll make a cask. I'll create a cask for brewing using item creation. C'mon, cask! Caaask.

Brewing Cask—Materials: Wood × 10

“Woohoo!”

“Wh-what happened?” Sylphy asked me.

“Oh, I can make a workbench that should work for brewing now.”

“Brewing, you say? Like for brewing spirits?” Sir Leonard asked.

“It might do that, yeah.”

“I shall go pilfer grapes and barley!” Sir Leonard dashed straight back to the storehouse. It was close by, but that old man must’ve been dying for some wine and beer.

“Will you be able to make mead too?” Sylphy asked.

“Maybe.”

“I’ll go get some nectar.” Sylphy dashed back to the storehouse too. *You two sure love your alcohol.*

Anyway, I could make brewing casks now. *I’m glad it costs so little to make. I guess I’ll make two of them.*

“Hmm? It stacks?”

Normally, the workbenches didn’t stack in my inventory, but the casks did, just like other materials and items. Did that mean these were consumable items?

“They’re cheap to make, but if they’re not reusable, they might not be so cheap after all.”

The brewing casks were finished, so I took them out and accessed them. The brewing menu appeared.

Miso——Materials: Soybean × 2, Grain × 2, Salt × 2, Water × 2

Soy Sauce——Materials: Soybean × 1, Grain × 1, Salt × 2, Water × 4

“All right!”

Miso and soy sauce require pretty much the same ingredients... And yeesh, soy sauce takes forever to craft. A whole 19.2 hours? But wait, it must've originally been 24 hours reduced by 20 percent thanks to my Skilled Worker skill. And miso takes half that. Usually, this stuff probably takes years to mature.

As it so happened, it took about 200 grams of soybeans to make one unit of miso. The cask was as big as a regular cask. *They must get really packed in.*

The law of conservation of mass was on vacation yet again today.

"Kousuke, I've brought the nectar," Sylphy announced.

"And I have brought grapes and barley," Sir Leonard added.

The boozehounds arrived just as I was preparing the miso and soy sauce. I took what they brought and accessed the brewing cask's menu.

Elven Mead—Materials: Nectar × 2, Water × 6

Wine—Materials: Grape × 10

Ale—Materials: Barley × 4, Water × 4

Beer—Materials: Barley × 3, Hops × 1, Water × 4

Well, what did you know? I could make them. Elven mead and wine were their own separate recipes, understandably enough, but I was surprised to see that ale and beer had their own too. *I don't have any hops... I bet I could use the herbs Ira and the elves gave me instead. But which kinds would work? I'll have to figure it out later.*

The crafting time for ale was a surprising 8 minutes. *That's fast!* The elven mead was the next fastest at 30 minutes. Beer took 4.3 hours, while wine took 8.6 hours.

"We can drink ale right away?! And we can drink the other kinds of alcohol tomorrow?!" Sir Leonard asked, overjoyed.

"Don't get too excited now."

"I would hardly call it that. But to think that you can make even alcoholic

drinks that quickly..." Sylphy said.

Sir Leonard was more than ecstatic, and even Sylphy had a happy smile on her face. I didn't know if it was true of Sir Leonard, but I knew that Sylphy loved to drink. She was still considered a child among elves, but she was older than me, so I couldn't really protest.

"I am also intrigued by the miso and soy sauce you're concocting," Sir Leonard said.

"They've got a unique flavor to them, but they're delicious. Though they might not be to everyone's tastes."

Still though, soy sauce was an all-purpose condiment. I was sure everyone would be obsessed with it as soon as they tried it. Miso wasn't so versatile. The only things I could think of using miso for were miso soup and vegetables preserved in miso. And chan-chan-yaki, since it was basically a miso salmon stir fry?

Actually, cooked meat and fish dipped in miso might be pretty good. And we could try using it with soy sauce too. And it'd be tasty just to smear it on vegetables and munch on those too.

As I was telling everyone about this, the ale finished, so I took out a ceramic cup and poured it out of the cask.

"To our victory...though I guess we haven't won quite yet," I said.

"We still have many skirmishes ahead," Sir Leonard replied.

"But we can't deny that you and all of our soldiers managed to get back safely, and you even deterred the Holy Kingdom's army," Sylphy pointed out.

"Kousuke was the one who did that. However, you're right. I cannot deny it was a victory."

"Hee hee. Yeah. To our victory!"

"Victory!"

We lightly clinked our cups together and then gulped down the ale. This was my first time drinking it. Unlike beer, it wasn't bitter. It tasted a bit sour, but it had a fruity note to it, which I liked. *I might prefer this to beer.*

“Hmm, this is my first time having ale. Not bad,” Sylphy said.

“I agree.”

“This ale you’ve made is of high quality,” Sir Leonard told me. “The ale offered in your average tavern on the edge of town tastes like horse piss in comparison.”

“Really? Remind me never to go drinking in those kinds of places.”

Even while we drank, I continued setting up things to brew. I could mass-produce casks using the improved workbench, so I was banging them out one after the other. I had a large quantity of crops to prepare for brewing, too. I prepared the same amount of miso and soy sauce while I prepared as many casks as I could for making elven mead, wine, ale, and beer.

I wound up with 20 casks each for miso and soy sauce, 25 for elven mead, 20 for ale, and 5 for beer. The number of casks really stood out, since I had started all of this right next to the food storehouse. Naturally, we drew plenty of attention.

“Sir Leonard, is that ale?”

“Yes, it is. Kousuke made some high-quality ale for me. You should all have some as well.”

“Are we allowed?”

“I don’t mind. Let’s all drink together.”

“Her Highness has given her permission. Drink up, everyone!” Sir Leonard shouted.

“Thank you!”

“Can’t remember the last time I had ale!”

“How many years has it been?”

It turned into a banquet as the fresh recruits and my patients from among the newly liberated trickled in. The food storehouse was opened, and we let everyone take what they wanted from the reserves as I silently prepared more ale.

Was I okay with not drinking, you ask? If I didn't do this, I was afraid everyone would drown in the bottle and die of acute alcohol poisoning, so I refrained. I told everyone I had to make ale for them to drink as a way to politely decline people pouring more for me.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Sylphy continued downing the ale she was offered, despite not being used to drinking it; she was getting thoroughly plastered.

"It ferments way too fast," Ira said, watching me with a dull eye as I opened another cask of ale that I had only just set to brew not too long ago.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from Kousuke!" Pirna was gulping down a ceramic mug of ale which she dexterously held in both of her wings.

"La-la-laaa! La-laaa!" Meanwhile, Pessa the tawny harpy had found a tune to carry at the bottom of a pint glass. She had a really nice voice.

"What on Leece... Your Highness? Kousuke..." Danan rushed to the scene, having heard all of the commotion. He was speechless at the sight of Sylphy cackling like mad and me quietly making ale.

I took a fresh ceramic mug out of my inventory, poured ale into it, and held it out to him. "Drink up."

Danan was silent a moment before sighing deeply as he took the mug from me. Yeah, there was no point in getting mad at everyone for disturbing the peace now that Sylphy was completely wasted. All he could do now was drink and put everyone back in order tomorrow.

"Hee hee hee! Kooousukeee!" Sylphy was out of her gourd.

I lent her my shoulder as I guided her to our private lodging. The space was ours and ours alone, and I had made sure to soundproof it after much consideration. I'd had some reservations about putting up a special building just for the two of us, but everyone had given their okay, so I went ahead and built it.

"Now lay down. I'll put out some water for you, too."

"Mm-hmm."

I laid Sylphy down on the bed and placed a pitcher and mug on the side table before I went out to the living room and sat down on the rattan couch.

“Phew.”

While the building materials themselves were different, the layout of the house was practically the same as Sylphy’s. The only differences were that it didn’t have the passage or backyard and it was directly connected to the bathroom.

I looked out the window; it wasn’t that late in the day yet. We’d eaten lunch at the storehouse and then snuck away as soon as everyone seemed nice and drunk. I left all of the ale I made behind.

“I have a feeling we’re going to be growing more barley.”

There was a theory that ancient people had grown barley not for eating bread but because they wanted to get shithoused. I didn’t know whether the theory was true, but after seeing how much alcohol brought a smile to people’s faces compared to food, I was beginning to think that there was something to it.

Sylphy was sound asleep now, and I didn’t have any pressing business to attend to, so I was taking it easy for the first time in a while. I placed an improved workbench down in front of me, accessed it, and started playing with item creation to see if there was anything interesting I could make.

“Hmm, I guess I can’t make mithril bullets. Which reminds me, I haven’t made a bayonet for bolt-action rifles yet.” They did actually come with bayonet mounts, so I was sure that I could add one if I crafted one.

“I’ll use the mithril ferroalloy and...there!”

I had heard from the lamia blacksmith that adding just a tiny bit of mithril increased the strength of iron and helped to minimize rust. When I tested it for myself, I discovered it was stronger than steel, so I had been replacing all of my equipment recently with ones made from mithril ferroalloys.

***Bayonet for Bolt-Action Rifles (Made with Mithril Ferroalloy)——Materials:
Mithril Ferroalloy × 1, Wood × 1, Mechanical Parts × 1***

Bayonets need mechanical parts? Oh, wait, maybe it's used for the locking mechanism? Makes sense. I'll slightly increase the current number of finished bolt-action rifles to make a total of fifteen. The only people actually using them are Jagheera and a number of soldiers who tested well for marksmanship, after all. But maybe I should make twenty just so we have some spares.

I wanted there to be a few more gunslingers, but that meant supplying bullets for training. Assuming you had ten trainees that shot thirty bullets during one training session, you'd burn through three hundred bullets. If that number of people trained every day they'd drain me dry of materials. Though right now we might be able to get by if they only practiced once a week.

Even so, between Jagheera, myself, and three others, we used a hundred and fifty bullets a week. I understood quite well the high cost and minimal returns of guns. With crossbows, we could recover the bolts shot during training, and even if some of the tips broke, we could sharpen them or melt them down to make new ones.

And if we started using repeating rifles? I didn't even want to imagine it! We were a long way off from ever being able to use weapons that just chewed through ammo like assault rifles and submachine guns.

Regardless of whether I plan to make them, it'll be useful to add a bunch of different things to my crafting list using item creation. I hadn't made them all yet, but I already had a little over a hundred types of weapons added to my crafting list. And not just blades, but small arms and other stuff too. I kept the ones that looked good hidden in my inventory. For example, my private stash of mithril weapons.

"Hee hee hee. It's so exciting to have an arsenal to yourself." I took out a so-called short sword from my inventory. It had a broad blade that was about the same length as my elbow to the end of my middle finger. It was a double-edged sword with a simple guard and handle. Maybe I'd call it Sting.

Huh? That's too obvious of a reference? You worry too much.

"Mwa ha ha. Such a beautiful blade."

“Yeah, it’s pretty. Just as mithril should be.”

“I know, right? Huh?!”

I was so absorbed gazing at the mithril short sword and grinning like an idiot that I hadn’t noticed Ira standing right next to the edge of the couch. *Huh? When did she even come in? I didn’t even hear her.*

It was dangerous, though, so I put the sword away and my improved workbench along with it.

“Why the sudden visit?”

“I was hoping to talk to Her Highness.”

“O-oh.” I wanted to ask what about, but part of me didn’t want to know. *Nah, I shouldn’t ask. Yeah.* “She’s passed out right now.”

Ira hadn’t participated in our little impromptu boozefest. I bet she couldn’t really hold her liquor. Not that I could hold it all that well either.

“I see,” she said in that usual flat tone of hers. She sat down next to me. For some reason, she started tugging on my arm. Based on how she was pulling it, I got the feeling that she was trying to get me to lay my head on her lap.

“H-hey.”

“Nngh!”

I tried to stop her, but she was stubborn. Left with no other choice, I stopped resisting and allowed her to guide my head to her lap. Even clothed, her thigh felt warm and soft against the right side of my face.

“Uh, so what’s this about?”

“Because I said that I’d take good care of you when you got back.”

“Ah, right.”

So she was keeping her word about the golem communicator. She stroked my head. I couldn’t see her face, but I could tell that she was enjoying this.

“I’m not too heavy?”

“You’re fine.”

But this position wasn't entirely comfortable for me. I had gone from sitting right next to her to lying my upper body down. My lower back was definitely gonna have words with me later.

"This should help."

I got up off the couch, put a pillow close to the wall and had Ira sit with her legs stretched on it. I had her spread her legs a little, and then I burrowed my head right into the gap. Now this was more like what you'd call a crotch pillow than a lap pillow.

"This is kind of embarrassing, but it's okay since I can see your face," Ira said.

"I know, right?"

The good thing about this position was that we could see each other's faces, and her legs were unlikely to go numb. There was a faint blush to Ira's cheeks as she petted my head. *Ahh, this feels nice. Ira looks young at a glance, but being doted on by her like this makes me feel like I'm a baby.*

"You're an adult, right?" I asked.

"Huh? Of course I am. I'm already 42 years old."

"You don't look that old at all by what I'm used to."

To put it bluntly, she looked even younger than a junior high schooler. And she wasn't anywhere near 150 centimeters. Both her arms and legs were slim; she was petite. I got the feeling that wearing her hair in a bob made her seem even younger. Her eye being so big might have been a factor.

"You sure are strange. Humans usually are grossed out by people who look like me."

"Yeah, I suppose they might be. But it doesn't bother me in the least."

I had actually been pretty into the so-called monster-girls genre. I wasn't opposed to them at all; in fact, I actually liked them quite a bit. You could probably categorize them under three different classes. The "casual" class included elves, angel girls, devil girls, and girls with animal ears. Medium class included cyclopes, lamias, harpies, arachnids, slime girls, girls with unnatural skin colors, and girls with black or white eyes. *Girls who don't look human at all*

could be their own class, I guess?

There were all kinds of ways to categorize them; this was just my personal taxonomy. *I'd say I'm a medium-class guy.*

I reached out to touch Ira's cheek. It was so soft and squishy. Her cheeks glowed a little as she gently placed her hand on mine, rubbing my hand against her cheek. The way she was acting was so cute that it was pushing me close to the edge.

"You seem to like to be doted on too," I said.

"I just might. Shall we trade places?"

"I'll have to pass on that."

There were all kinds of bad things about having a girl in the same position I was now. It was simply too risky.

"Are you sure?" Perhaps she didn't understand, judging by her disappointed expression.

Ira seemed to be really into being physical. I would say that Sylphy preferred conversation. Actually, Sylphy was pretty into touching as well. And she really liked being doted on.

Speaking of which, just how long are we gonna keep doing this? Until Sylphy wakes up? Won't that result in a bloodbath? Sykes, help! What am I supposed to do in a situation like this?!

My anxieties gnawing away, I sat there snuggling with Ira for the next hour and a half.

"Mm? You're here?"

"Yes."

Sylphy got up with a yawn and exchanged brief words with Ira—who was petting me, since I was using her as a crotch pillow again—before disappearing into the bathroom. I had a feeling her body was cashing all the checks she'd written with her drinkin' arm.

"You seemed anxious for some reason, but just so you know, we talked for a

bit yesterday.”

“Oh, you did?”

Now that she mentioned it, Sylphy had unexpectedly gone out after dinner last night. So she had gone to talk to Ira, then? Ira had probably come here to continue the conversation.

“Can I ask what you guys talked about?” I asked.

“How to split you between us.”

“Split?”

“Yes. Her Highness gets the right half of you, and I get the left.”

“You’re just joking, right?”

“Of course I am.”

I really wished she wouldn’t joke like that with such a serious expression on her face. It was bad for my heart. For a second there, I was afraid that they’d just bisect me with Pale Moon. Once she’d wrapped up in the bathroom, Sylphy sat down on the rattan couch and patted the space next to her, beckoning me to sit next to her. I obediently got up and sat next to her. And then Ira sat next to me. I was outflanked.

“So, Ira, about how we were going to split Kousuke.”

“Yes?”

“How about you get him during the day and I get him at night?”

“That’s not fair. I want to sleep with Kousuke too.”

“Hmm, then how about we switch off every day?”

“That works for me. And if one of us can’t be with him because of work, then the person who’s available gets him instead?”

“That’s really the only thing we can do, isn’t it? All three of us have a lot of responsibilities.”

“Okay then. So you’ll be his lawful wife and I’ll be his concubine?”

“Yeah, I think so. But it’s not going to be just the two of us. Pirna and the

other harpies will likely become his wives too.”

“We can discuss that when the time comes. Fortunately, the harpies have always had a culture of polygyny. I’m sure there’s a lot we can learn from them.”

“Right. There’s wisdom to be learned from our neighbors with naturally rare menfolk.”

As Sylphy and Ira discussed how to share me, I sat there in the middle without making a peep, my arms taken prisoner by the ladies on either side. Nothing good could possibly come from me speaking up in a situation like this. I was a machine that provided the services they needed, that’s all.

Just then, they turned to me.

“Do you have anything you want to add, Kousuke?” Sylphy asked.

“Yes, your opinion matters,” Ira agreed.

I’d been holding my breath, hoping that they’d forget all about me, but they were dragging me into it anyway. *Gah, of course going stealthy doesn’t work this close.*

“I think what’s most important is that you two can get along like sisters.” I felt that way from the bottom of my heart. It wouldn’t do for them to be cold to each other. Mainly because it’d take a toll on my mental health.

“Hmm, I see. So you want us to be like sisters? Then you need to stop calling me ‘Your Highness,’ Ira.”

“Okay. What should I call you?”

“Probably something like Big Sister Sylphy?” Sylphy must have been a little bit older than Ira.

“Big Sister Sylphy,” Ira parroted.

“That’s kinda weird, huh? Well, is it okay if I continue calling you Ira, then?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, Big Sister Sylphy.”

“Hee hee. Now I’m the big sister. I was the youngest kid in my family, so I always wanted a little sister. I never expected that I’d actually get one.”

“Indeed.”

The amiable conversation continued. It seemed like the two of them would get along fine. If they were going to share me, I wanted it to be in harmony. It sure made me happy to see them on good terms with one another; peace settled in my heart.

“Wait, wait, wait! we’re just gonna jump into this kinda thing just like that?” I blurted.

I was trapped on the bed. Sylphy had just ripped all of my clothes off and thrown them into a corner. She and Ira had a fierce hunger in their eyes.



“I’d hardly call this ‘just jumping in.’ It was bound to happen sooner or later,” Sylphy said.

“I was prepared for this eventuality. I’ve brought medicine as well. *Gulp...* Phew.”

“What kind of medicine?! Is that safe to drink?!” I protested.

“You have nothing to worry about. It takes a little while for it to kick in.”

“Then allow me to show you Kousuke’s most sensitive spots,” Sylphy said.

“Okay.”

“Hey! Wai—oh! Ahhh?!”

I tried to resist, but it was futile.

I woke up the next morning squished between Sylphy and Ira, who were both cuddling me. My joints hurt, since I couldn’t turn over. My lower back ached too, and my whole body felt heavy. I opened the menu to check my stats and saw that my health and stamina were depleted by about 60 percent, even though I’d just woken up. I lay there and watched the bars, but they didn’t tick any higher. I checked the status abnormalities category to find that it said, “Emaciation due to sexual overindulgence (light).”

Wait, seriously?

Ira had been knocked out pretty easily, but she’d revived right away—probably because of that medicine she took before we danced the bedroom tango. I was worried about how it might’ve affected her body. While she was out of action, I had Sylphy to contend with. It was cruel to make me take on both of them at once.

“Mm...” Sylphy began to stir, perhaps she’d sensed that I had woken up. She gazed absentmindedly at my face for a moment and then lightly kissed my shoulder and the nape of my neck before she found her way to my lips. “Good morning, Kousuke.”

“Morning, Sylphy.”

“Ira’s...still asleep, I see. I guess I’ll get up and make breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

She kissed me again before slipping out of bed.

Meanwhile, Ira was snoring cutely with her arms wrapped around my arm. Her big eye had such long eyelashes. A young and sweet face with a tiny physique. It was a bit strange to think about how this petite lady was actually older than me. She had a slight smile on her face, as if she was enjoying whatever she was dreaming about. Seeing Ira looking so content as she slept made me nod off again as well.

“Rise and shine, you two. Breakfast is ready.”

“Mm... ’Kay.”

“Mngh...”

Although I had fallen asleep again, Sylphy shook me awake. Ira’s big eye blinked sleepily. She must have been exhausted after all that exertion.

“My body aches all over. And I still feel like I’m being squished between something,” I complained.

“You’ll get used to it eventually. For now, you two go get washed. The bath’s warm,” Sylphy commanded.

“Right-o.”

“Okay.”

As I sat up and stretched, my joints audibly crackling, Ira tumbled out of bed with a thud.

“Hey, you all right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m not hurt.”

“What’s wrong then?”

“I can’t stand up.”

“Oh, okay then.” I carried Ira like a princess in my arms and brought her to the

bathroom. Yes, I had remodeled the storage room into a bathroom. We had no need for storage, after all. One day, when Sylphy was away, I had set things up so that groceries could be stowed in the kitchen.

Far to the north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were living their lives, a stout man in refined white-and-gold vestments sat in his castle office, listening to the report of a lightly armored man with a sword hanging from his waist. It would have been clear to any outside observer that the rotund man was of high standing within the clergy—and, in fact, he was an archbishop.

“Completely annihilated? Did you just say that five thousand soldiers have been *completely annihilated*?!” The archbishop’s vision went dark as he balked at the possibility.

“Y-yes, Your Excellency! There were fewer than twenty survivors, and by the time they arrived at the fortress, they were so exhausted that we couldn’t get a satisfactory report out of—”

“I don’t care! What... What in the world happened?! They were up against rabble whose numbers couldn’t have surpassed a thousand!”

His whole body trembled uncontrollably. He was sure to lose his position if the report was true; there would be no escape. *To have lost so many entrusted to me by the king himself and the pope, and to rabble at that... No! This isn’t the end! I’m sure there’s still something I can do about this situation! If we say that they were wiped out by gizmas in the night, then I might manage to...!*

“Wh-while it’s not entirely conclusive, some of the survivors say that the wrath of God leveled not only the fortress they had seized but even the army itself, leaving no trace. Others say it was a demon that attacked them, and some claimed a door to the Demon World opened.”

“Wrath of God?! Demons?! Or the Demon World?! Like any of those would kill people! It’d be far more realistic if they had said that a horde of dragons had burnt them all to ash!” The archbishop couldn’t help but snap at the messenger’s ridiculous report. In his fury, he picked up a silver goblet from his desk and hurled it to the floor. The wine inside the goblet splattered, leaving a

dark stain on the bright red carpet. It looked like blood. “I’ve heard enough! Get me accurate information! I want *concrete details* as soon as possible! Even if you have to wring their necks to do it!”

“R-right away, Your Excellency!”

The lightly geared man was dripping with sweat as he fled the room. After making sure he was gone, the rotund man, Archbishop Aureus, fell back into his seat with a thud. He stuck both elbows on the desk and cradled his head in his hands, muttering to himself. The archbishop was so concerned with trying to figure out how he would deal with this mess that he didn’t hear the faint sound of a droplet of water splashing.

Chapter 8:

Let's Begin Our Invasion!

“WHAT IS THE MEANING of this?” Danan asked.

“I can’t stand because last night was too intense,” Ira explained.

“So I’m carrying her,” I added.

I had arrived at the conference room carrying Ira like a princess in my arms. Danan sunk into silence after hearing our explanations and looked away. He was probably pretending he didn’t see anything.

“I’m sorry about yesterday, Danan,” Sylphy said.

Danan shook his head in response, as if to tell her not to worry about it, then changed the subject. “Ahem! I know you all just got here, but I’d like to propose a change in our plans.” The man was completely pretending he didn’t see Ira and me.

Hey, how dare you act all serious when you’re clearly averting your eyes from the reality before you! Although, uh, I suppose we’re the ones at fault here.

“A change? What kind?” Sir Leonard asked.

“Hmm, well, we dealt the Holy Kingdom’s army a heavy blow thanks to Kousuke’s plan. They probably don’t have an accurate grasp of the situation, and I believe their forces at the fortresses

close to the badlands are depleted. I was thinking we should take a more aggressive approach by reclaiming the fortresses near the border.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmmm.”

“Hmm.”

Everyone in the conference room mulled it over with a thoughtful hum, starting with Sylphy.

If I remembered correctly, our original plan was to hide in the badlands, gather forces, and gradually liberate people in the villages near the borderlands to increase our numbers. We decided on that plan because we were severely lacking in numbers. Even if we managed to capture one of their bases, we wouldn't have the power to hold it.

However, we'd managed to secure far more people than we had originally imagined by freeing the laborers from the rock salt mines. Not all of them could fight, but what had started as a small force of about three hundred people had more than quadrupled.

Since we had managed to reduce the enemy's numbers so dramatically, they'd probably be unable to launch a counterattack so easily. The more we won, the more our influence would spread throughout the kingdom, while the Holy Kingdom's would wane. As a result, more citizens would rally to us.

Normally, a radical increase in population would threaten our food supply, but by making full use of my powers, we'd be able to compensate for the extra mouths to feed easily. As for attacking the fortresses, Danan seemed confident that we'd be able to capture fortresses that were pretty much empty at this point so long as we didn't complicate the plan further. With my help, invading the fortresses would probably be easy. If I quickly expanded the underground tunnel directly underneath, then all we had to do was send our soldiers in and take control.

It appeared everyone else was having these same thoughts; when I looked around the room, they all looked receptive to the idea.

"Just how many people can we mobilize?" Sylphy asked.

"Immediately, about two hundred people. But that should double in a week if all we require of people is to shoot crossbows," Danan replied without hesitation.

"Four hundred, then? There are three fortresses in total along the border, right?"

"That is correct. I believe it will be possible to hold them with a sufficient number of crossbows, bolts, and supplies. Before our last attack, the harpy scouts reported seeing approximately six and a half thousand soldiers. That

would leave a force of no more than a thousand men. By simple calculations, that leaves less than four hundred who could be posted at each fortress.”

“You want to do this based on simple calculations? To say nothing of the fact that they’re holed up in fortresses. I don’t think it’ll be that easy when you consider we only have two hundred soldiers who can hold their own in hand-to-hand combat.” Sylphy was right to be concerned. It was obvious that they held a home field advantage. I mean, they were in fortresses, after all. It would be practically impossible for a smaller force to defeat them and take control of it. Well, normally, at least.

“I doubt that will be an issue; we have Kousuke’s weapons to give us an advantage of our own. We can render their defenses completely useless with aerial bombardment.”

If we were shooting at one another within projectile range, the goat’s foot crossbows would be an equal match for the Holy Kingdom’s bows. Even taking into consideration how they’d be taking up positions above the bulwark, we pretty much surpassed them in terms of power and range.

Moreover, if the harpies dropped bombs on top of the bulwark or the castle gates, then the fortresses’ defenses wouldn’t hold up for long. Even if we heavily damaged the structures, I could just repair them afterward.

“Hmm, so this strategy of yours—it assumes that Kousuke is on the front lines, doesn’t it?” Sylphy asked.

Danan hesitated. “Yes.”

Sylphy narrowed her eyes at him. You’d know what I mean if I said she was giving off an air of intimidation, right? Everyone present felt this intense pressure coming off of Sylphy that gave us all chills. I was on the verge of wetting myself, even though I wasn’t on the receiving end.

“And you think that I will actually agree to this?” Sylphy demanded.

“No. However, it is necessary,” Danan responded, coolly absorbing Sylphy’s intensity.

As the tension swelled between the two, one brave soul spoke up.

“I approve of this plan,” Sir Leonard said. “We will have to face them somewhere if we are to turn the tide in our favor. If we’re going to carry out this plan, we should act before they prepare countermeasures of their own.” He didn’t seem bothered when Sylphy directed that aura at him either, and it came as no surprise that he could withstand it. *You guys are something else.*

“Countermeasures, you say? Ira, what do you think?”

“It’s hard to say. As far as the harpy bombs go, they could defend against one of them using high-level earth magic. If they don’t mind chewing through their valuable resources by making defensive magic items, then that’s another option in their playbook.”

“So you think the Holy Kingdom could completely repel them that way?”

“Impossible. I doubt that they will be able to acquire enough powerful mages for that. It’s just not realistic to deploy magic items to their entire fighting force either. If I were them, I would focus on shooting down the harpies or bombs rather than trying to defend against the bombs. It would be possible with wind magic or some newfangled multi-elemental lightning spell.”

“And how long would that take to prepare?”

“Inventing a spell from scratch would take quite some time. Probably years.”

“I see. And what would you do against crossbows?”

“They’re powerful, but they can be blocked using a magic barrier. It would be impossible to block shots from a bolt-action rifle, however. They’d easily pierce straight through.”

“Hmm.”

We were looking at a matter of years before the Holy Kingdom developed a full complement of countermeasures, but not many, and by then we’d need to upend how warfare worked all over again to keep our advantage.

“I suppose we have no choice. However, if Kousuke is going out onto the front lines, then so am I. I won’t hear any objections,” Sylphy announced.

“But, Your Highness—”

“We’re equally important. If either of us dies, the Liberation Army won’t last.

So long as I protect Kousuke and Kousuke protects me, we'll have a much greater chance of survival. Isn't that right?"

She wasn't wrong—I had a feeling I'd be able to make it through somehow, even if I got surrounded on the battlefield, so long as I had Sylphy by my side. I was sure I'd be able to help her out as well. I agreed that having her with me would greatly increase my survivability.

"Do you think I'm so easily defeated? Will I forever remain a weak, delicate princess in your eyes, Danan?"

Danan quieted, then said, "Your will shall be done."

Just like in sumo, their quarrel came to an end as a draw due to injury. Danan had convinced Sylphy to allow me to go to the front lines of battle, but she'd be going along with me.

The problem was that they had decided to send me to the front lines without asking my opinion about it! *I mean, I guess it's okay... Uh, no. It's not good at all. Not like I have a choice, though. They're all counting on me. I gotta work hard so that I don't get in anyone's way. Man, thinking about being on a live battlefield already has me spooked!*

Now that we'd decided to go on the offensive, everyone was hustling around getting ready. I increased production for food, mass-produced every kind of equipment and ammo, and mined the mineral resources dotting the badlands.

I spent my nights messing around with Sylphy and Ira, although I wished they'd take it a bit easier on me. At this rate, I was gonna dry up completely. I banned Ira from using that medicine; I wasn't gonna last long otherwise. Medicine for me? Don't even suggest that. Got it?

Ira worked energetically alongside R&D to help with everyone's projects. It didn't seem like there'd be anything ready in time for our attack.

Speaking of which, thanks to the magical materials everyone gathered for me, a new kind of workbench was added to my recipe list.

Enchanted Workbench—Materials: Mithril × 5, Gem × 12, Enchanted Stone × 20, Enchanted Wood × 10, Enchanted Clay × 10 *Not enough materials!

Yep, as you can see. I pulled together enough mithril and gems, but I was short on enchanted materials. I would have to get the crew to make them using the magic from the node our home base was built on. It was going to take a long time to make it all, though, so it wouldn't be ready before we struck out.

But still, an enchanted workbench... I was looking forward to finding out what I could do with it.

Sylphy, Danan, Sir Leonard, Pirna, and the others were all busy with drills and briefing sessions. They were using the golem communicator to stay in touch with the home base. Melty, Madame Zamil, Gerda, Shemel, and our other important allies were there, after all. They probably had to discuss training soldiers and transferring supplies with them.

Then, one day, after a very busy week...

"What in the world is going on here?!"

"Kousuke, when you get home, you're supposed to say, 'I'm home,'" Sylphy chided as she sat on the couch.

"Oh, sorry. I'm home. So, what's the meaning of all of this?"

As for why I was so confused...

"Welcome home, Kousuke!" Pirna chirped.

"Welcome home," Pessa said.

"W-welcome home, darling!" That was Flamé.

"What they said," Ira chimed in.

The harpies from the recon team we'd posted to watch the fortress demolition were standing with Ira in the kitchen. It looked like she'd put them to work helping her make dinner. I had to wonder if harpies could actually cook with those wings of theirs, but they were surprisingly deft with the utensils.

"We're all about to go out into battle..." Sylphy began.

“Uh-huh.”

“So they wanted to indulge in this kind of relationship with you.”

“That’s awfully blunt.”

“Well, you never know if you’re gonna come back alive from a sortie.”

It felt like someone had just punched me in the face. I hadn’t been thinking about it so seriously before, but it was true that we were heading out to a battlefield. A real, genuine battlefield. One where people killed one another. No one could predict what would happen or who might die.

I glanced at Sylphy; her lips were twisted into a smirk. I hadn’t seen that kind of look on her face in a while. She clearly knew I was shaken by this revelation.

“Especially because the humans from the Holy Kingdom have a deep, personal contempt for us harpies,” Pirna wore a wry smile.

“I-If one of us were to fall into the middle of their army...” Flamé trembled, unable to finish her thought.

Pessa laughed dryly. “We’d be lucky if they just killed us on sight.”

Ira merely stared at them in silence.

“Sylphy...”

“That goes for all of us, right? Whether there’s two, three, four, or five of us?”

“I don’t think it’s the same.” *Hold on, that’s not right. That’s not what I wanted to say.*

“You can be so bothersome.” Sylphy smirked as she drank from her porcelain cup of mead. She seemed to be enjoying this.

“I was just thinking about this seriously.”

“Kousuke, you may be a Fabled Visitor with one-of-a-kind powers, but you only have two arms, and there’s a limit to what you can do. Besides, we’re soldiers. Me, Pirna, Pessa, Flamé, even Ira. We can take care of ourselves. If we can’t, and we bite it, then that’s on us. You aren’t responsible for who lives and dies on the battlefield.”

“But you won’t die if you don’t go.”

“Perhaps? But they’re bound to attack us at some point if we hide ourselves away in the badlands.”

“But aren’t they fighting the Empire? I doubt they have troops to spare to come after us out here.”

“That’s not true, Kousuke. If they manage to make peace and assign their forces elsewhere, then the Holy Kingdom is sure to begin expanding west again. And if they do, they’ll cross the badlands and try to take the Black Forest. I just know it.”

“The war with the Empire has worn on too long. Both sides are exhausted. No one would be surprised by an armistice at this point,” Ira said as she came out of the kitchen carrying a big pot.

Pirna and the other two harpies nodded quietly.

“Anyway, let’s have dinner.” At Sylphy’s command, everyone sat down at the table.

Ira started scooping the contents of the pot into bowls and passing them out. We were having something like congee tonight. It was yellowish and had a sweet smell; I assumed it was made out of wheat. Whatever it was, it was unusual.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A traditional harpy dish. It’s nutritious and helps with digestion.”

“Hmm. Thanks for the meal.”

I spooned some out and took a bite. It was like faintly sweet congee with a slightly soupy consistency. It had an unusual texture. It didn’t feel like flour, and it was thicker than I had been expecting. Maybe they had added eggs?

“How do you like it?”

“I think it’s good? Though, it’s kinda more like a dessert than dinner to me.”

Cream of corn soup was sweet too, but this was even sweeter without quite crossing the line into candy. It had a good aftertaste, kind of a refreshing herby note. It was a pleasant, stick-to-your-ribs sort of meal.

“Yeah, this has more of a home-cooked meal taste to it than what I usually slap together. Nothing can beat traditional dishes,” I said.

“You think so? I’m glad to hear it!” Pirna said.

“I-I’m just happy you like it...” Flamé murmured.

“Ahh, I’m just glad you’re enjoying it so much after we went through so much trouble to lay those!” Pessa said.

“Say what?” *Lay those? Lay those?! Lay what?! She doesn’t mean...eggs, does she?!* “Y-you can’t be serious.”

“Mwe hee hee. That’s right, this dish is made using their eggs,” Sylphy said.

“Whaaat?!”

Huh? For real? Is this really okay? By which I mean, is that even ethical?! But the harpies are eating them like it’s nothing too. Huh? I don’t get it!

“They’re unfertilized eggs,” Pirna told me.

“It’d be a waste not to eat them,” Pessa said.

“I-It’s okay,” Flamé said.

“They’re delicious,” Ira said.

I was assailed by culture shock. This was so mind-blowing that I didn’t even care about going to war anymore. I was eating eggs that they had *laid*.

Whaaat? They’re really cool with that? Wow.

“We do not eat fertilized eggs,” Pirna pointed out.

“That’s right,” Pessa agreed.

“O-of course we don’t,” Flamé said.

“Um, okay...” *Is that the issue here? But how do they even differentiate between fertilized and unfertilized eggs?*

“Fertilized eggs don’t come out of our bellies,” Pessa said.

“Yeah?”

“Our bellies get bigger when we actually are pregnant,” Pirna explained.

“Bwuh...?”

“He has the funniest look on his face right now,” Ira said.

“You made that face a lot too right after you first met him,” Sylphy told her.

In other words, they grew fertilized eggs in their stomachs as fetuses and unfertilized eggs came out as eggs. What absurd ecology harpies had. *What in the world?* By this logic, unfertilized eggs were—nope, best not to think about it. There was no closing that door once it was open.

“Would you like seconds?” Pirna asked.

“H-have as much as you’d like,” Flamé said.

“Like I said, we went through the effort, so you’d better not leave a single bite behind!” Pessa said.

The harpies cheerfully urged me on, completely ignoring my distress.

When you think of the phrase “joining forces,” it brings to mind the image of a great number of people coming together or everyone crowding around something, doesn’t it?

I’m sure you must be wondering why I’m bringing this up. Well, that was my impression of what had happened after dinner last night. Yeah, handling five people was a bit much.

Even though there had been six of us getting down and dirty, it was a lot easier for me than it was with just Sylphy and Ira. Perhaps that thing about that traditional cuisine having nourishing effects had some truth to it.

“Good morning, dear,” Pirna said.

“G-good morning, darling,” Flamé said.

“Morning, hubby,” Pessa said.

My body was enveloped in warm feathers when I woke up. Pirna and Flamé had their arms wrapped around either side of me, while Pessa had her arms around my waist. *That’s an awkward spot, Pessa.*

“Where are Sylphy and Ira?” I asked.

“They both got up already and said they were going to go make breakfast,” Pirna said.

“Okay.”

They stroked me with their feathers, making me feel a bit ticklish, but it felt nice too. They were so warm that it made me feel sleepy again.

“H-how do you feel?” Flamé asked.

“Strangely okay. I’m more worried about you three,” I said.

Even though it had been our first time and they didn’t even resort to pharmacological solutions as Ira had, we had gotten rough.

“Ah, it’s probably because of the eggs we laid,” Pessa said.

“Yes, we’re okay on that front,” Pirna said.

“I see,” I replied.

I chatted with them from beneath their natural down quilt until Sylphy and Ira told us breakfast was ready. *Ahh, Pessa, that spot’s off limits. You hear me? No, I mean, you’re gonna get a response, plain and simple.*

“You seem quite tired so early in the morning.”

“Love is a heavy burden.”

Everyone was taking great care of me.

Sylphy had heated up a bath, so I hopped in the tub to clean off the night’s detritus. The harpies washed me down and it felt like heaven on earth. Though it was a bit exhausting.

“Ha ha ha. He did do his best for us all. But this is just the beginning.”

“What?” I asked, unable to comprehend what Sylphy just said. Just then, the harpies got out of the bath.

“Pirna, how many hopefuls were there again?” Sylphy asked.

“Eighteen.”

“Good luck, Kousuke.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I could feel my face stiffening. Was she telling

me to sleep with *all* of the harpies? That was asking a bit much of me. Maybe I could support them all, but I didn't have it in me to be *that* dependable. The very thought of that number made me feel plumb close to the edge.

"We are all quite serious about you," Pirna told me.

"You're our savior, after all," Pessa said.

I glanced over at Sylphy, and she quietly shook her head. "That's just how harpy culture has always been, from what I've heard. One male shares a few to a dozen or so women. Or, if they're unlucky, one male gets shared between dozens, even hundreds of women."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"It's true. Harpies give birth to harpies. And all harpies are female. It's quite common for a whole generation of harpies to be half sisters."

"That's such an utterly fantastical ecology!"

Within the span of a few days, all of the harpies, including Fronte's squad, became my partners. Sylphy and Ira were quite aggressive in their attacks in the face of such rivalry, so while my heart felt satisfied, my body was in agony.

"Let's hang in there," Sykes told me.

"Yeah."

I'd bumped into him for the first time in a while, and we shook each other's hands firmly. He must have been able to sense my current situation from my face.

"The only thing we can do is build a shelf in our hearts, friend," Sykes said. "A shelf in our hearts."

"I feel that's a whole other level of seriousness... Oh yeah, take this. It'll help with exhaustion and keep up your stamina."

"I'm much obliged."

I handed Sykes a stamina recovery potion that I had recently developed. Its recovery effects weren't dramatic, but it lasted a very long time and gradually

brought lowered stamina and health back to normal values.

“Let’s hang in there,” I told him.

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t until the day after that they announced our strategy for invading the Kingdom of Merinard.

“You seem quite tired. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, I swear.”

Do I have circles under my eyes or something? Danan seemed worried about me the second he saw me in the conference room. As it so happened, Sylphy and Ira had taken up their positions to my left and right, with the numerous harpies sitting next to them. All of the ladies were glowing. *Are they sucking away my vitality?*

Sir Leonard smirked, his older feline features radiating mockery. “Being popular sure is tough.”

What are you smirking about? I’ll knock your block off. The day’s gonna come when I’ll send you to the home base and hurl you all out the windows over and over until I run out of ’em. Just you wait.

“This will be an all-out war. Our goal is to throw the entirety of our main force at them and capture all three fortresses, one after the other,” Danan told us.

“Mm-hmm, and what of our troops?” Sylphy asked.

“We currently have two hundred elite soldiers who can participate in hand-to-hand combat and three hundred crossbowmen who have achieved mastery through training.”

“Our numbers have increased.”

“Indeed. There were more people among those we liberated who wished to contribute to the war than I had imagined. This is how many soldiers we’ll have at our command even with those remaining behind to defend each base.”

About 50 crossbowmen had also learned how to operate the ballistae. While

that didn't sound like much, with crossbows, ballistae, and the seven-meter-high protective wall, that should be plenty for taking care of gizmas.

"I suspect we won't be wanting for military supplies, so long as we have Kousuke," Madame Zamil said as she looked at me. The lizardfolk spearmaster was, as always, hard to read. It had been a while since I had last seen her.

Madame Zamil had been put in charge of the home base with Melty, so she hadn't been a part of our previous liberation operation or subsequent repelling of the enemy, so she had demanded to join this operation for reclaiming territory in the kingdom. As someone who had instructed members of the royal family in spearmanship back when they all lived in Merinard and who'd been a killer vanguard fighter in the rebellion three years ago, she must've been itching for action.

Like Sir Leonard, she'd commissioned a mithril weapon from me. Mithril was a very durable metal, so she hadn't needed a weapon as big and as thick as the beast spear I gave her before. Even so, she requested a spear with a long blade, so I'd made her something like a longsword with a long hilt. It wound up looking something like a cross. The butt end was tipped with a second blade. She had named it Shooting Star and would patrol the home base's borders with it, skewering gizmas to let off steam.

"It is problematic that we're putting so much responsibility on Kousuke's shoulders," Sir Leonard said.

"I wouldn't go that far," Madame Zamil replied, "but the division of responsibility is certainly lopsided."

Making and passing out supplies for five hundred people was going to be a lot of work. Nevertheless, I was the only person who could do it, so I knew I had to in order to earn my keep.

Sylphy forced a smile. "There's no point in feeling guilty about how much we rely on Kousuke this late in the game. At this point, our goal should be to lighten his load as soon as possible."

Everyone wore strained looks, apparently thinking the same thing. *Well, it's not like I'm resentful about how much you folks rely on me.*

“So who will be participating this time?”

“Me, Kousuke, Danan, Madame Zamil, Ira, and Melty. Sir Leonard will stay behind this time.”

“If I must. It’s understandable, since I went last time.” Sir Leonard acquiesced with a nod. *And let’s not forget that you made a huge mess of our plans.*

Four of the harpies would be staying in the frontline base, so not all eighteen of them would be deployed. They’d be sticking around as scouts, since we could communicate with the home base via golem communicators now.

In addition, soldiers who had once been part of the kingdom’s military like Worg and Gerda and ex-adventurers like Shemel and Indy were moving out.

Jagheera and four others who had achieved bolt-action rifle mastery were going to make a musketeer squad. This crew and the harpy bombing squad would be under my command because they were using weapons I’d come up with and wouldn’t be able to resupply if they were too far from me.

“Our fundamental tactic will be to weaken the enemy’s resistance using harpy aerial bombs and then surround the fortress. Under the cover of night, Kousuke will burrow through so we can send soldiers to seize it from the inside,” Danan explained.

“We plan to block messengers as best we can. We want to capture two of the three fortresses before we’re discovered. Although we’ll be using bombs, we must make sure to take out any messengers from the first fortress we attack,” Sylphy said.

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Any other questions? No? Very well, let us begin.”

As we filed out, Sir Leonard said, “You can count on me to take care of things here.”

I already had all of the necessary supplies in my inventory and our troops were all packed and ready to go, so we deployed right after the meeting.

The vanguard was led by Danan and comprised elite soldiers from the

kingdom's army. They numbered about a hundred people, including forty or so heavy infantry wielding shields and one-handed weapons. The other sixty were infantry in light armor made of gizma carapaces and armed with crossbows, spears, and short swords. They excelled at formation fighting.

Behind them were three hundred soldiers led by Sylphy and her adjutant, Madame Zamil. They were, in a way, our main force, and wielded the same kit as our light infantry. Fundamentally, the crossbows would be their main weapons, while the spears and short swords were for self-defense in case they got embroiled in melee combat. They weren't as proficient with the crossbows as Danan's soldiers, but they had them pretty much mastered.

The rear guard, led by Shemel, comprised a hundred ex-adventurers. They were all equipped with a wide range of arms, but their individual abilities surpassed Danan's elite soldiers. They were tricky to use strategically, but they were all very good in a melee. We planned to primarily utilize them when storming the fortresses.

In addition, there were my five musketeers, the fifteen harpies, and Ira's ten mages. Melty's team of officials was another ten people, but we weren't counting them among our fighting force.

"I bet you and your people are actually pretty strong," I said.

"Little ol' me? Why, I'm as weak as a lamb," Melty said.

"Uh-huh, sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Melty had so easily overpowered Sylphy while getting her to dress up for me that one time that I didn't believe for a minute that she was weak. I had a pretty big feeling that if things took a turn for the worse, she'd jump in and mow down the enemy.

Our march was moving at a pretty good clip. We ran into gizmas on occasion, but a quick crossbow volley here and there rendered them a non-issue. Once they were down, I collected their remains. *I sure do wish y'all would wait until they got a bit closer before killing them, though.*

"Good work, Kousuke," Ira said.

“Thanks.”

“What was that baffling jumping thing you were doing while you moved?”

“Oh no, here come the troublesome questions!”

Ira had caught on to my strafe-jumping exploit, but I had no explanation for how it worked.

“Those two sure are close,” Melty said to Sylphy.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe I should join in on the fun soon too.”

“No, you stay out of it.”

“Why? You’re such a meanie, Sylphy.”

While I was floundering for an explanation for Ira, I got the sense that a scary conversation was going on behind me. I decided to pretend that I didn’t hear a thing. *So Melty really does have her eye on me. The very thought sends a chill down my spine.*

I looked to Jagheera, pleading for help, but she averted her eyes. *How dare a subordinate abandon their superior officer like that!*

In the end, I was unable to give Ira a satisfactory explanation and wound up having to bounce around in front of her. Because I couldn’t explain with words, she’d have to observe me so she could come up with her own conclusions.

“It’s incomprehensible.”

“I know, right?”

She couldn’t figure out a theory behind it, just like my other powers. As if exhausting myself with all the pointless jumping wasn’t bad enough...

“It weirs me out so much.”

“It’s so bizarre.”

“To be honest, it does kind of make me feel uncomfortable.”

I got all of these comments from everyone else. My glass heart was on the verge of breaking.

“What a bunch of meanies. Come to Mama; I’ll cheer you up.” Melty spread her arms out wide to beckon me in with a loving smiling on her face. The way her chest jiggled so splendidly rivaled Sylphy’s.

Pfft, like I would fall for such obvious bait—

“Mommy! Waaah!”

“Don’t fall for something so obvious, you idiot.”

I gave in to instinct and readied myself to take the plunge, but Sylphy grabbed me from behind by the collar, strangling me. Ira also materialized to punch me in the sides, her cheeks puffed out. It didn’t hurt, but I could tell she was displeased.

“Kousuke’s so carefree,” Melty said.

“Look, I’m just easily excitable when I’m nervous.” It was only the first day, but we were drawing ever closer to the battlefield. It would be weird if I didn’t feel nervous. And when I got really nervous, I got excitable and really talkative.

“I see. Sylphy, make sure you take proper care of him.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“I don’t mind helping out if it winds up being too difficult for you.”

“No thanks.”

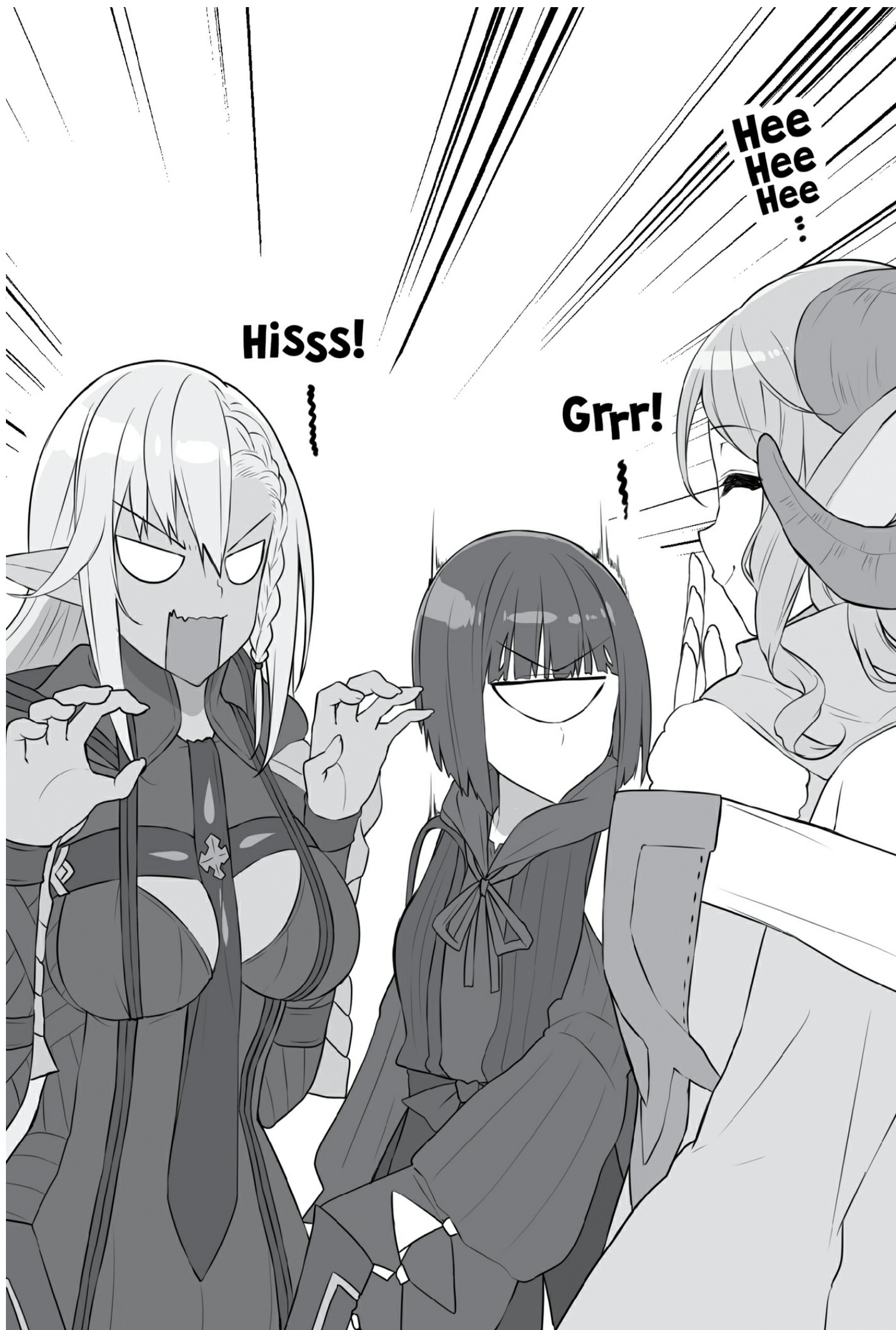
Sylphy and Ira clung to either side of me, keeping up their guard against Melty. It was a bit unusual though, maybe?

“Hee hee hee.”

“Grrr!”

“Hissss!”

Melty was laughing merrily as Sylphy and Ira tried to intimidate her. Ira was... Would you even call that intimidating someone? It was cute, though.



HiSSs!

Grrr!

**Hee
Hee
Hee
...**

Just then, from up ahead, we heard someone shout, “I’ve spotted our destination!”

Somehow, we had arrived at the first shelter. We had enough room for everyone to sleep without issue. I would have to work on food once we got there.

“I hope we can get to know one another much better too, Kousuke,” Melty said.

“Uh, okay?”

“Grrrrr!”

“Hissss!”

Their scare tactics showed no signs of stopping.

Far to the north of the Great Omitt Badlands, where Kousuke and the others were busily doing their thing, a stout man was restlessly walking in circles around a desk. The white robes with golden embroidery gliding behind him as he paced marked him as a high-up member of the clergy.

“What should I do? What should I do? What’s the right move here?”

After losing a thousand soldiers, he—the archbishop—had lost another five thousand. That was roughly half of the forces stationed in this province. Losing half their troops would likely hamper their ability to keep the roads safe and maintain public order, starting with the defense against monsters and bandits. No, not likely—it *would* hamper it. Most certainly.

“Should I gather mercenaries? No, if I did such a thing, they would know. But it’s impossible to hide what’s been happening at this point. What should I... What should I...?!”

The words *What should I do?* kept tumbling through his mind, but in truth, he already knew. It wasn’t a matter of what he could do—in fact, nothing could be done. He was in checkmate, and his position as archbishop was as good as gone. If anything, he’d be relegated to some remote region or even demoted. No, perhaps he couldn’t outrun his mistakes.

“Grrgh. Graaaagh! Why? How did this happen?!” The man was overcome with rage at the absurdity of the situation. He simply couldn’t comprehend it. But at present, he did know two things.

Firstly, he knew this was no mere uprising among the demi-humans. They had strong fighters and some mysterious power that enslaved demi-humans did not possess. Some of the kingdom’s men had claimed they sighted Leonard the Twin Fanged. In other words, this was clearly related to the revolt three years prior.

Secondly, the man was convinced that they wielded powerful unknown magic or weaponry. That would explain how a scrappy group of fifty had routed a hundred cavalymen and annihilated close to nine hundred infantry, bowmen, and logistics officers, as well as a battalion of over five thousand soldiers, in a single night.

What kind of sick joke is this? he wondered. *It’s absolutely impossible. And yet, it actually happened. We still have no idea what this magic or weapon actually is. This is a nightmare. For now, I need to prevent the situation from getting any worse. I’m sure they’ll be calling for my head if it does. Literally.*

As he contemplated his fate, there was a knock at the door. A weak one. He had a bad feeling about this.

“What is it?”

“We just received a messenger from a fortress along the border... Um, he said it’s urgent.”

Give me a break already. O God! O Adol the Father. Where did I go wrong?

The archbishop looked up to the heavens. The faint sound of laughter came from a corner of the room, but in his despair, the archbishop didn’t hear it.

Chapter 9:

Let's Capture Some Fortresses!

WE SPENT THE NIGHT at the first shelter and did the same at the second, third, and fourth shelters before we arrived at the ruins of the temporary fortress. It had been more than two weeks since the temporary fortress blew up, so we prepared ourselves for a gruesome sight. Y'know, fields of putrescent gore, desiccated bodies frozen in their final moments of agony, that sort of thing.

"There's a whole lot less than I was expecting," I said.

"It still smells some, but it seems that the gizmas cleaned up the place for us," Sylphy replied.

As we got closer, the gizmas' numbers dramatically increased. They were probably the ones who had come here to feast on the corpses. But when I thought about how they had taken care of all the mess for us, I got to thinking they might actually excel as cleaners.

After collecting and dismembering the gizma corpses, I disposed of the meat. We weren't keen on the idea of eating anything that had eaten a person. There were so many issues with that. However, I would use their carapaces, leg tendons, and such for materials.

We proceeded past the site of the temporary fortress to construct a new temporary fortress in a place that didn't reek of death. Using the blueprint function, I was able to pop it out in an instant.

"To the enemy, your powers must be straight out of a nightmare," Sylphy told me.

"I know, right?"

A fortress had sprung up out of nowhere, after all. In actuality, this new temporary fortress was less than half a day's walk from the nearest fortress along the border. It was a bit farther from the fourth shelter, but there was no helping that. We had fought a ton of gizmas along the way, so by the time we

arrived here and I put down the fortress, it was already dark out.

“I-I saw about three hundred and fifty soldiers,” Flamé reported.

“Morale’s lookin’ a mite low down thar,” Capri, another tawny, added.

After dinner, the two had gone out for nighttime reconnaissance and were now giving their report in the temporary fortress’s conference room. Harpies didn’t usually have good night vision, but these two were exceptions.

From the way the feathers on Flamé’s head bounce, almost like animal ears, maybe she’s something like a horned owl? But what kind of bird does that make Capri? A nightjar? Capri was an unusual lady who spoke in an unpretentious accent reminiscent of Kansai speech from Japan.

“Let’s get some rest and then head out at the crack of dawn. We’ll surround their fortress in the early morning and cut off any messengers,” Sylphy said.

“An early-morning attack? I am all for it.” Madame Zamil grinned viciously. Maybe she intended for it to come off as a broad smile, but it looked quite vicious on her reptilian face.

“We shall proceed as we discussed before we left. Surround the fortress, prevent them from sending messengers. The harpies will bomb them to thoroughly whittle down their ability to resist us. All the better if they surrender. If they don’t, we’ll wait until nightfall, when Kousuke will burrow our way underneath the fortress and we’ll send in soldiers to seize it from the inside,” Sylphy said.

“I believe we said that the fortress has two entrances?” I asked.

“Yup. We saw ’em both. Right, Flamé?”

“Y-yes, Capri’s right. One to the north and one to the south.”

“I shall take half of my elites and the crossbowmen to defend the northern side. Your Highness, I would like you to take the remaining soldiers to defend the southern side,” Danan said.

“Does that mean it’s okay if I go with Her Highness to contain the southern gate?” Shemel asked.

“Yes, please do,” Sylphy replied.

“Right-o.”

“I’ll take the mages to help blockade the northern side,” Ira said. “Since Kousuke will be with us on the southern side, I’m sure they’ll have a way to defend against arrows, but the troops on the north side will have insufficient defenses with our current composition.”

“Excellent,” said Danan.

In summation, Danan would be taking a hundred elite soldiers and one hundred fifty crossbowmen along with Ira and her ten mages to the north. To the south would be Sylphy and Madame Zamil leading a hundred and fifty crossbowmen with Shemel leading a hundred ex-adventurers and me with fifteen harpies under my command and five musketeers to lock down the gates.

The mages could protect them against arrows by creating barriers with wind and earth magic. Ira was right that Sylphy and I would be able to do something about pesky arrows. If I wanted, I could make a wall taller than their fortress, and we could just hit them nonstop without them being able to fight back. I wouldn’t, though.

“Well, now that we’ve verified the situation, let’s call the meeting here. Everyone, make sure you’re fully rested and prepared for tomorrow. Got it?” Danan looked at Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies. He knew who was in charge here, so he didn’t bother looking my way. His consideration for me brought me to the verge of tears.

Sylphy smirked. “Don’t worry.”

“Okay.” Ira nodded, her expression blank.

“No need to fret.” Pirna smiled on behalf of the harpies.

Danan looked at them skeptically but accepted it for now. I prayed that the women would be true to their word. To be honest, I really didn’t mind it all *that* much. Who would be bothered by beautiful ladies sneaking into your bed night after night because they desired you so? I supposed it would be more accurate to say that they dragged me to their bed than snuck into mine. At first, my moral values from growing up in Japan got in the way, but I was completely used to this arrangement after a week. *I even look forward to it now, ha ha ha.*

Danan looked at me in silent pity. *Stop staring, please. It'll get to me...*

Everyone actually restrained themselves, so I was able to have a quiet night for the first time in a while. However, we all slept together in this gigantic bed—whatever's bigger than king size. Sylphy and Ira's bodies and the harpies' feathers sure felt warm.

We woke up while it was still dark out, ate, and marched. Since we couldn't use fire, the other soldiers had block cookies and jerky. We, however, had warm meals that I took out of my inventory. Sylphy was with me, after all, so this kind of special treatment was expected.

Dawn still had not broken when we arrived at the fortress at the border.

"Do you think they've noticed our approach now that we're this close?" I asked Sylphy.

"It's not yet dawn, but it's starting to get brighter. It'll be too late for them, even if they start panicking now."

Danan's force had already split from us. They should have been in position to block the northern gate by now. We could see soldiers scurrying around on top of the fortress's walls, and a bell was ringing intermittently. It must have been the alarm.

"Okay, Kousuke. Let's go."

"You're not gonna give them an order to surrender or anything?"

"No. It'd be pointless."

"I see. Okay, let's get into crossbow range."

"Got it. Forward march!"

At Sylphy's signal, the crossbow squad took up positions about seventy meters from the walls. Using the goat's foot crossbows, which had relatively strong plate springs, we could easily hit enemies on top of a wall from this distance. The crossbowmen had practiced shooting at targets on castle walls from this distance during their training.

“Kousuke.”

“Coming up.”

I began to put down shields in front of everyone for protection against arrows. The enemy still hadn't readied their counterattack yet, but Madame Zamil was guarding me just in case. Arrows came flying at me sporadically, but they didn't even graze me.

Once the shields were set, the crossbowmen began returning fire. The enemy was taking quite a lot of damage thanks to everyone's training. We sustained some injuries as well, but we were overwhelming them.

“Kousuke,” said Pirna, “we're going to join the fray.”

“Okay. Let's get you ready.”

I started equipping the harpies with their bombs. The task itself was simple. I had further improved the bombs, so now the harpies could just hang the hook for them on harnesses instead of needing the string fastened to them. All the user had to do was grab the handle and then pull the hook attached to the string that set off the fuse. Each harpy needed only about ten seconds to get ready.

“Now, we're off!”

“Remember, safety first!”

“We won't forget!”

I watched the harpies fly away as Sylphy ordered the crossbowmen to prepare for the explosions. It'd be stupid to let ourselves get hurt by the shrapnel and whatnot that would come flying at us. We would focus on defense, keeping ourselves hidden behind the shields until the bombings were over. Sylphy, Madame Zamil, the civil officials, and I would hide behind shields I put down.

When I looked up, I saw the harpies dropping their bombs from high above.

“Here it comes! Everyone down!” At Sylphy's order, everyone hid behind the shields and plugged their ears. I had warned them to open their mouths, but how could that possibly help?

We heard an incredibly loud sound, and then came the impact. We could still feel it from behind the shields.

Once we confirmed that the explosion had subsided, we peeked out and saw the fortress in a pitiful state. Huge sections of wall were collapsing or barely even standing. The gate, which had been the epicenter, was partially destroyed. I didn't know what it was like inside, but I was sure that it was in an equally bad state.

"Uhh, what should we do now?" I asked.

"Hold on. Danan, what's the status over there? We've destroyed the southern gate, and the enemy won't be able to stop us," Sylphy said over the golem communicator.

"Same here. Shall we storm the fortress?"

"Yes. We'll begin our assault in five minutes."

"As you wish."

Just as they finished their conversation, the harpies returned.

"We did it! It was a huge success!" Pirna cheered.

"We got more of the enemy," Capri said.

"Praise us, praise us!"

"Uh, yeah. Good work," I said.

As I was talking the harpies down, Sylphy and Madame Zamil told the ex-adventurers to prepare to storm the fortress. Shemel eagerly brandished her giant kanabo. We didn't know how many enemy soldiers were left, but I felt bad that after taking such a heavy blow, they'd have to face this lot.

"It's time to storm the fortress! After me!" Sylphy rallied the troops.

A loud, whooping cry rang out among them. "Aaahhh!"

And with that, Sylphy led the charge. The attacks coming from the top of the bulwark had already stopped, so there was nothing to impede them. After a flash of light, the broken gate was blown away by Sylphy's spirit magic. *What in the world did she just do? That was terrifying.*

For a short while, I heard the sounds of battle inside the fortress—or rather, I kept hearing the angry cries coming from those who were rushing in. I said short, but it was only about ten minutes. Then came resounding battle cries as a new flag was raised above the partially destroyed gate. It was the flag of the former Kingdom of Merinard.

“It looks like they’ve successfully taken the fortress,” Melty said.

“Yeah. That was fast.”

The only things I had done were put down shields and take bombs for the harpies out of my inventory. I had helped them gear up, but Melty and her people were just as responsible.

“Guess I gotta go repair this sorry fortress.” I looked wearily at the walls and the gate that Sylphy had utterly destroyed. I felt like it might actually be easier to just turn the place into a vacant plot of land and rebuild it with the blueprint function.

“Good luck. We’ll be rooting for you.”

“Thanks?” I replied listlessly as I began to make my way toward the fortress, but then Melty grabbed my arm.

I gave her a quizzical look as she leaned toward me and whispered in my ear. “If you so desire it, I’ll give you a reward later.”

“Eek!” I couldn’t help but tremble at the seductive tone of her voice.

“Nooooope!” Fortunately, Pessa and Capri cut in between us. *Nice job.*

“Don’t give in, Kousuke. I don’t even wanna think what’ll happen if you piss off Her Highness,” Capri warned.

“I’m sure you’ve got things to do inside the fortress, so we’ll take care of things here.”

“O-okay.” I decided to follow Pirna’s suggestion and head inside. I could’ve sworn I heard giggling and chirping coming from behind me, but I was sure it was just my imagination. I dashed into the fortress without looking back.

“Bluuuuuuurgh!”

“That’s repulsive,” Ira said.

“Hey, I’m sure this kind of scene is hard to stomach for those who aren’t used to it,” Sylphy said.

The inside of the fortress was a dreadful spectacle. While bloodstained corpses and corpses with no physical defects were sort of charming, in a way, it was the unidentifiable bits and pieces that set me off. It was awful. Just plain awful. Like, so bad I didn’t have the words to describe it anymore. After seeing this, I could see just how much consideration they put in for players of gory games. Also, it stunk. Reeked to high hell.

“This is mostly because of the bombs,” Ira noted.

“Yeah, regular weapons are incapable of this kind of carnage. Though perhaps it would be possible with magic,” Sylphy said.

“At any rate, we cannot use the fortress in its current state. Let’s get this cleaned up as quickly as possible.” At Danan’s command, the elites and ex-adventurers began gathering the scattered corpses in one spot to burn them.

Sylphy had been rubbing my back the whole time. *Thank you, Sylphy.*

“Oh, how are you going to burn the bodies?” I asked.

“With magic. Then we’ll bury the ashes,” Ira answered.

Normally, they would do their best to identify the bodies and snip off their hair, but under the circumstances, standard operating procedure didn’t apply.

“Any prisoners?”

“We have about twenty of them. They were the people lucky enough to be knocked out with minor injuries and the few who surrendered when faced with combat. The majority of those still alive and able to move chose to resist and died in battle. As zealous believers in Adol, surrendering to demi-humans would be an unimaginable disgrace,” Sylphy answered.

“For real? Religion is scary.”

“I agree.”

Nevertheless, it still felt like it was over way too soon. Bombing them had probably been too unfair on our part; it hadn't really felt like a battle at all. I heard that there were less than 50 soldiers who could still fight in the fortress when we stormed in.

"You're going to repair the fortress now, right?"

"There might still be enemies in hiding, so I shall be your guard." Madame Zamil stood next to me, wielding her glimmering mithril cross spear.

I heard that she had already used it to gleefully mow down the enemy.

"This is quite a nice spear. It's incredibly sharp." She grinned broadly, having noticed me looking at Shooting Star. It scared me.

Thus, we had taken the first step to reclaiming the Kingdom of Merinard.

After they were done cleaning up the corpses, I got very busy. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that that was when my actual work began.

"You've gotten quite good at this," Sylphy said to me.

"Well, yeah, I've dealt with a ton of them by now."

I restored the partially destroyed buildings and walls and placed a watering hole. The fortress had a well, but my infinite water source was far easier to use. While I was busily repairing everything, everyone cleaned up the bloody fortress. We had five hundred people to help out, so the cleaning went pretty quickly.

"They left quite a bit of supplies here." Melty beamed once we had plundered food, weapons, and more from their storehouse. So far, the Liberation Army had been operating pretty much only on what I supplied, so they had practically no assets of their own. However, once we reclaimed the Kingdom of Merinard and restored it back to a normal economic bloc, they would have to run a normal, functioning economy. In other words, they needed to pay everyone wages.

"Was there any money?" I asked her.

"Yes, a bit. Most of it was the soldiers' personal savings, though."

“The general stationed here must have had a decent amount, right? They did need to pay everyone, after all.”

“Yes, to an extent. But this is a frontline fortress.”

From Melty’s point of view, it probably wasn’t nearly enough. I doubted that such a small fortress would have that much money to go around. Melty wasn’t wrong: this was a frontline fortress. They wouldn’t keep some massive jackpot tucked away in a place like this. Was it really acceptable for us to loot the place like a bunch of bandits, you might ask? We were at war, y’know. It was our lawful right to plunder.

Since we had launched our attack early in the morning and taken back the fortress so quickly, we were done with repairs and cleanup by about noon, and I had finished outfitting the place.

“Kousuke wound up having to rebuild all of the buildings inside of the walls,” Sylphy told the harpies.

“No point complaining about it,” Pirna replied. “Kousuke’s lodging houses are cleaner, sturdier, and easier to use.”

“Yeah,” Fronte said. “I agree.”

Everyone immediately relaxed as we ate lunch. I was sitting with Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies.

Lunch was a hearty soup made of dried meat, vegetables, mushrooms, and other ingredients that had been in the fortress’s reserves, as well as dumplings kneaded from grainmeal. It was really close to the suiton I’d eaten back in Japan. The harpies seemed especially pleased with the soup—unsurprising in that the soup really made the best of what we had available, and surprising in that they seemed to have little trouble using spoons.

Could I really afford to kick back? Yep, sure could. I’d done a ton of work already, and it was only right that I filled my stomach. However, after we finished eating, Sylphy was probably going to call a meeting about our next course of action, and the harpies would most likely head out on reconnaissance.

As for me and Ira, I was all done and Ira had finished incinerating the corpses and treating the wounded. Frankly, we didn’t have anything else to do. I had

already restocked what was needed in the storehouse and set up ballistae on top of the bulwark too.

“What are you going to do after lunch?” Ira asked me.

“I’m not sure; I already did everything I had to do. I guess I’ll check around the inside of the fortress again. Once I’m done with that, I’ll make a field in an empty spot. Think I’ll just relax afterward.”

“Okay. I’ll go with you.”

“You wanna? We might get summoned to the meeting, so we’ve gotta keep that in mind.”

“Understood. The rest of you are going on reconnaissance, right?”

“Yes,” said Pirna. “Three to a squad. Reconnaissance goes much quicker now, thanks to those golem communicators you made.”

“I’m glad.”

So my guess was right. Which reminded me—I didn’t know how far away the other fortresses were, so I asked.

“This one’s located in the middle of the three. I believe the fortresses to the east and the west are three days’ walk from here,” Sylphy said.

“Three days? That’s pretty far, but the golem communicators should work just fine at those distances,” I said.

“Yeah, they should. There aren’t any hills or mountains to interrupt the signal,” Ira said.

“Nice.”

After we finished eating, it was time for a short rest. I took out the gargantuan bed I had brought with me from the frontline base, and we all took a nap. We had gotten up early today and were all pretty tired after the fight and post-battle cleanup.

After an hour-long power nap, Sylphy and the harpies set out to complete their respective duties. Ira and I were left alone.

I yawned. “Wanna sleep a bit longer?”

“No. Everyone else is busy, so we ought to be too.”

“You’re a serious one. Well, all right.”

Ira and I patrolled the fortress, checking for flaws. The soldiers of the Liberation Army all looked chipper. I supposed it was only natural, since we’d managed to seize a fortress held by the Holy Kingdom without much peril.

“It’s thanks to you that we got back at the Holy Kingdom’s army,” one soldier told me.

“Though I wish I could’ve tormented those bastards a bit more,” said another.

“It’s because we made them go *boom*. It was kind of a letdown.”

“Don’t get careless, now. We don’t know who among us would be dead right now if it weren’t for that explosion,” I warned.

We hadn’t suffered a single casualty; the enemy’s resistance had been sporadic. Several people had been stuck with arrows, but no one was hit anywhere vital. The wounded had mages to look after them.

I told everyone, “If any of you find something that needs fixing in the fortress or that looks like an inconvenience, lemme know so I can patch it up.” They nodded. Being on good terms with all of the soldiers like this made my job easier too.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anything that needs attention,” Ira said.

“Yeah. Guess I’ll make a field.”

“Right, we don’t want to starve.”

Everything looked more or less okay, so I placed farmland blocks in the empty field I’d made and started tilling. The others would probably be able to harvest crops in about two weeks, even if I wasn’t the one planting the seeds. This power sure was questionable.

“What should we grow?” I asked Ira.

“Hmm, something that’s easy to eat and has a long shelf life.”

“That’d be talu root, I guess.”

“Indeed.”

Talu roots were a tuber from the elven village with a texture similar to taro. They could keep for a long time covered in dirt and stored in dark places, and they were pretty tasty if you just washed them and boiled them in salt. Once I was done diligently planting the talu roots, my work was truly done. It was still early afternoon.

“I’m out of stuff to do now.”

“I think you’ve done plenty for today. It’s important to rest.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Since Ira had suggested as much, we returned to our assigned lodging house and spent our time relaxing. We couldn’t possibly go through with the whole deed as things stood, so we only fooled around a little bit.

What, you expected me to join in the meeting and help plan our next move? That was Danan and Sylphy’s domain. The most I’d done was furnish weapons and blow up five thousand people. I didn’t have nearly as much experience as they did, so it wouldn’t do for me to overstep my bounds. I wouldn’t want anyone to think that I should do anything and everything.

I’d give my counsel if they requested it, but I was still an amateur when it came to war. I was able to propose bizarre plans that used my powers, but it was dangerous to rely solely on those kinds of plans. And I was sure that Sylphy and Danan didn’t intend to completely rely on me to win this war.

Be that as it may, the bombs were so effective that there was no way they wouldn’t use them. They were our greatest advantage.

“What are we having for dinner tonight, Kousuke?”

“Hmm, let’s have curry.”

“You sure like curry.”

Aye, I wish not to put more burden on these bones today. The corpses were just too gruesome a sight...

The next day, we left a hundred crossbowmen and half of the mages under Worg’s command and departed for the fortress to the west.

At this point, the surrounding landscape was changing from badland to prairie. We could also see some kind of woodland off in the distance, so it really made me feel like we had arrived at the other side of the Great Omitt Badlands.

Right now, we were proceeding west from our first occupied fortress—I guess I'll call it the Alpha Fortress—along the reasonably well-maintained main road. Prairie stretched out all around us; it was quite peaceful. Naturally, pitting our crossbowmen against the Holy Kingdom's cavalry would be a nightmare on this terrain, so our scouts were sticking close.

If the enemy spots us first, I can make us an encampment on the field, so maybe it wouldn't be the end of the world, I thought as we got a call on Danan's communicator. We had gotten a message from the harpies who had been scouting in the direction we were moving.

"There is a convoy of horse-drawn wagons with guards in the direction you're headed. They're coming your way," a harpy reported.

"Is it the Holy Kingdom?" Danan asked.

"I do not believe so. Likely some merchant."

"And they're headed toward the fortress?"

"Most likely; the fortress is the only thing in that direction."

"Track them and take care not to be spotted."

"Understood."

The call ended there. *Now what do we do?*

"Shall we attack them?" Danan asked.

"We're not bandits. And we're not in need of any supplies," Sylphy said.

"But if they're bringing supplies toward the fortress, then that means they're a merchant who's aiding the army," Melty pointed out.

"Why would a merchant be supplying them? Isn't that what logistics officers are for?" Sylphy asked.

"This is just a guess, but perhaps it is because Kousuke blew up all of the ones for this vicinity in the temporary fortress."

The three of them began discussing how to deal with it. Danan's vote was for attacking them, Sylphy's vote was to not, and I wasn't sure about Melty.

"This will depend on their attitude," said Melty, "but I believe that they are likely a prominent merchant from a nearby town. We have nothing to lose by trying to make friends with them. I think it would be a good idea to try talking to them rather than attack without warning." She seemed to be implying that their attitude would determine whether they lived to see another day.

"So ultimately we should let them go? But then they'll warn the Holy Kingdom about what we're doing," Danan said.

"Please consider who's in charge here. If we can turn prominent local merchants against the Holy Kingdom, regime change becomes that much easier. Don't tell me you plan on killing everyone from the Holy Kingdom living in Merinard."

"I wouldn't say that, but—"

"Danan, I agree with Melty. They'll treat us with contempt, but I want to do what I can to minimize the public's resentment."

"If you say so, Your Highness."

"Merchants are open-minded when it comes to their own interests. If discussion goes well, we could possibly make an ally—well, perhaps we wouldn't consider them that, but at the very least, they might trade with us." It sounded like Melty had something in mind. She *did* seem particularly good at negotiations.

"We'll leave the diplomacy to you," Sylphy told her.

"You can count on me."

"Then I shall put forth every effort to seize this convoy. I want you to help us too, Kousuke," Danan said.

"Sure thing."

Danan intended to have everyone conceal themselves on the sides of the road and surround the caravan. Even during the day, we couldn't be seen when we were hiding amid the grass.

Sylphy, Melty, and I would intercept the caravan with a small squad of elite soldiers. It was my job to barricade the road if need be. My brick blocks could stop gizmas, so I didn't doubt that they could stop horse-drawn wagons.

After a little while, we saw a cloud of dust up ahead. We'd caught our first glimpse of the caravan.

"I'm pretty sure they'll stop, but stay on your guard. Put down blocks if they start to charge."

"On it."

I stood next to Sylphy, who had her arms crossed imposingly, as we waited for the caravan to arrive. They noticed us and gradually slowed, coming to a stop at a distance. Two people—a guard and a merchant, by the looks of them—stepped out from a wagon.

"I am a member of the Pence Trading Company and hail from Miliné. Why do you impede—" That was as far as he got before he noticed that Sylphy was an elf and that our soldiers were demi-humans. His face scrunched up in distaste.

"My name is Sylphyel. You might know me better as the Witch of the Black Forest." Sylphy raised her hand, and the four hundred soldiers on both sides of the road revealed themselves, weapons at the ready. I'd have wet myself if I were that merchant.

"Wh-whaaaat?! Why?! Why are you—?!"

"I don't intend to kill you. That might change if you intend to draw your weapons and resist. Do you?" Sylphy flashed a cruel smile.

Aww, man. If you do that, the merchant's gonna lose it. Look, even the guards are going pale. Some had already laid down their weapons and raised their hands in surrender.

Well, trying to resist would be suicide. They had five wagons and ten guards with them, and we had *four hundred*. They wouldn't have stood a chance.

"Wise choice." Sylphy nodded with satisfaction and then exchanged a look with Melty.

Melty dipped her head in acknowledgement and took a step forward. "My

name is Melty. I am in charge of conducting business to procure supplies under Princess Sylphyel's command. We are not bandits seeking to rob you of your goods. You said you are from the Pence Trading Company? I would like to do business with you. Fair and honorable business."

From this angle, I could only guess, but she must have been smiling. Yet, for some reason, the merchant foamed at the mouth and then passed out. *How unusual*. While the merchant was passed out, our soldiers approached the wagons to inspect their cargo. They had piles of food, salt, a few luxury grocery items, weapons, and arrows. Nothing special.

"Kousuke, we have gems and mead in stock, yes?" Melty asked.

"Yeah, we do."

"Could you take some out? I'd like to make a deal with him when he wakes up."

"Yes, ma'am." She gave me a strange look at my polite response, but I ignored it.

Melty seemed quite enthusiastic, probably because it had been a while since she had last gotten to negotiate with external parties. I felt bad for the merchant.

We'll have to cheer him up with mead today or something, I vowed as I took in Melty's murderous—uh, I mean, *enthusiastic* aura.

"Again, we are not bandits. We are the Liberation Army working to free all peoples from the Holy Kingdom's tyranny and oppression. As you are not members of their military, we will not kill you or rob you of your cargo. I would appreciate your understanding." Melty cheerfully explained our situation to the guy from the Pence Trading Company—the very rotund middle-aged fellow who had fainted just a little while ago.

Danan had joined Melty and the merchant at the table. Sylphy was royalty, so it wouldn't do to have her sitting with someone like a merchant to negotiate. I was sure she was watching from nearby. What about me? Actually, I was sitting at the table too. I looked like a regular human, after all. They took off my slave

collar and put me here, figuring it might ease this guy's nerves a little bit.

"Er, um... This cargo was meant for resupplying the fortress up ahead..."

"Yes, we know that. A fortress along the border, right? We've already occupied it, so your cargo has nowhere to go," Melty replied.

"What?!"

"Don't believe me? The fact that we are here should be more than proof enough." What Melty was trying to get at was that our current position was just a few hours' walk from the fortress. If the Holy Kingdom's soldiers had been alive and well, there was no way we would be sitting around in a place like this. "I can tell you will not believe me unless you see it with your own eyes. I understand. And worry not, for we shall provide you ample opportunity. But more importantly, onto the topic of the goods you have brought."

"Y-yes?" He was so confused that he couldn't say much else.

Yeah, I understand. I'd be acting the same way in your position. I mean, he was sitting across from Danan, who was already a bull of a man, and surrounded by soldiers. It would be impossible to keep a clear head. At the very least, I knew I certainly wouldn't be able to do it.

"Unfortunately, we do not currently possess much of the currency circulated under the Holy Kingdom's rule. Therefore, we would like to pay with these." Melty put a small cloth bag on the table and dumped the contents. Gems tumbled out with audible *clacks*.

"These are gems from the Black Forest. What do you think?"

"O-oh my... May I pick them up and take a closer look?"

"Yes, inspect them as much as you'd like."

The man took something like a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and picked up a large red gem. These gems had been polished by elven jewelers in exchange for some unpolished gems. They had been more than happy to polish these for us, of course.

"Fine quality, isn't it?" Melty prompted.

"Yes, it is. Quite remarkable."

They began to haggle. The merchant recovered himself once negotiations began.

“This many in all.” Melty set aside a portion of the gems and pushed them toward the merchant. However, he didn’t seem to think the proposed amount was worth it.

“That’s far too few. This much, then.”

“Do you think I’m some peddler of cheap baubles? This is elven craftsmanship! You’ll take this many and no more.”

Both of their hands moved hurriedly as they divvied out fistfuls of the motley gems to insist on before pushing them back into the pile to be portioned out again as they gauged their number, size, and quality weighed against the value of the merchant’s goods.

“These gems are of high quality and treatment, but you have no proof of their elven origin. I will take this much and no less.”

“That goes for all gems in the world, then! I am sure you know exactly where we have come from, and by extension, these gems. *This* is my final offer. It doesn’t do to get too greedy now, does it?”

“Urgh... Very well.”

Melty had won in the end. I had no idea if eight polished elven gems were a fair price for five wagons of supplies.

“Where shall we take our cargo?” the merchant asked.

“Excellent question. We are on our way to the western border fortress,” Melty replied.

“Is that so?”

“I would like you to bring your cargo there. You shall accompany us.”

“Wait, huh?”

“Your shipping fee.” Melty added a gem to the merchant’s hand, which was frozen stiff.

Wow, what a great deal—a whole gem just to shuttle things where they were

already headed! The place where we're going being a battlefield notwithstanding!

"Oh, okay... I see, so you've already seized the western fortress as well then?" The man paled as his question trailed off into fragile laughter.

"No. We are on our way to do so right now."

"Uh, um, but we—"

"Shall accompany us, yes?" Melty smiled broadly. *How scary! Her whole vibe screams that he'd die like a dog if he refuses!*

Oh dear, his face just went from pale to ashen. I glanced at his associates and guards; they all had hopeless looks as well. I totally understood. I'd have felt the same way .

"You have no need to worry. We shall take ample precautions to ensure that you stay out of danger." She was smiling as she said it, but from their point of view, standing beside us on the battlefield was probably akin to suicide.

It would be bad enough if they were seen by the Holy Kingdom's army and even worse if they were spotted bringing in supplies after we had seized the fortress. There was an exceedingly high chance that they would be seen as acting in the interests of the enemy.

"You said you are from the Pence Trading Company, yes? We will be counting on you. Let us both achieve happiness." Melty beamed.

"So what happened?" Ira asked me.

"She basically got all, 'We're in the same boat, tee hee! You're not getting awaaaay' on him."

"Ah, I see."

After negotiations, we resumed our march. Once we'd walked for some time, we set up camp in a grassy field by the side of the road. When dinner rolled around, we ate barley porridge made with the merchant's vegetables as well as some gizma meat I'd sneaked in.

They also had quite a lot of salt, so we added an ample share of that too. It was pretty tasty. The merchant and his guards were all eating the same thing, but they looked like they were getting ready to go to a funeral. It made sense, though. For sure.

I'm pretty sure that Melty's gonna break out the alcohol later, so drink up and forget your sorrows, folks.

"She must be planning to use them as a stepping stone to get the word out about our power," I said.

"Almost certainly. Once she's got them involved, she'll have them dancing in the palm in her hand," Ira agreed.

So she's after their connections and information network, then. Miguel, the guy Melty had negotiated with today, was a sales clerk at the Miliné branch of the Pence Trading Company. In other words, he was a section manager or chief clerk or some other flavor of middle management. Using him and his caravan would let Melty make inroads with their company.

"Just how big is this Pence Trading Company?"

"I don't know. But if they're supplying goods to the Holy Kingdom's military, then I doubt they're small fry."

"Yeah, they'd use the company with the most power in the region." Sylphy nodded in agreement with Ira's opinion.

That makes sense. Plus, they must be pretty big if they've got branches in towns. Even in Japan, you could tell a store's influence based on how far afield you could go and still find one of their vendors. I guess that kind of thing is the same no matter what kind of world you're in.

"Well, I'm sure all will go well if we just leave it to Melty," Sylphy said.

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"She's just the right person in the right place. I could pull it off, but not nearly as well as her."

"Yes, it's best to let her take care of certain things," Ira agreed.

"I guess."

I decided not to think about the matter too deeply. It seemed like it would be something akin to scaring out a snake by poking a bush. And that snake wouldn't just be a poisonous one, either, but a serpent that would gobble me whole. *Yeah, best not to get involved. Heaven forbid.*

After we met Miguel and his caravan, we had a few uneventful days of travel until we arrived at the west side fortress—or maybe I should call it Beta Fortress, since I was calling the first one Alpha Fortress.

The closer we got to Beta Fortress, the paler our guests' faces became, but their complexions actually returned to normal when we got within a stone's throw of it. If anything, they were calmer. *Have they attained enlightenment? Or are they going to fight back now?* If anything, they might've gotten used to us after traveling with us for three days.

At present, the crossbowmen were exchanging fire with the enemies on top of the Beta Fortress's walls. "So, we're just rushing at them head-on this time instead of attacking at night?" I said, eyes glued to the fight.

"Yes. We must make a display of our power," Melty replied nonchalantly.

Incidentally, the old middle management man from the Pence Trading Company had gone pale again and started shaking like a puppy.

"They don't even stand a chance," I said.

"Yeah," Sylphy agreed.

A strong headwind blew at our backs; the enemies' arrows didn't reach us, but the bolts from our crossbows flew relentlessly. We weren't as accurate as usual, though.

"Is this spirit magic too?"

"That's right. Impressive, isn't it?" Sylphy looked proud of creating such a gale.

According to her, the wind spirit magic in the prairie around here was strong and she could do this all day long. *Spirit magic sure is incredible.*

"They hid."

“Well, it only makes sense; their attacks aren’t working.”

I would’ve given up trying to fight back and devoted myself to defense too if we just kept getting wrecked. But that was a bad move.

The harpies took off from the back left corner of our formation; Sylphy’s gale carried them up at an incredible speed. Then they dropped the bombs. A thunderous sound rang out, and then the walls and gate began to crumble.

“Is it just me, or was their aim slightly off?” Sylphy asked.

“It’s probably because of the wind. Here comes the second round,” I said.

“Eek! O God...” was in the back-right corner of our formation, moaning away.

After confirming where the bombs landed the first time, they did a good job of correcting their aim, completely destroying the gate on their second pass. I had to wonder how everyone else in the Pence Trading Company was feeling about how we were destroying the enemy.

“The Holy Kingdom’s army is weak without their mage unit,” Sylphy said.

“They’re the Holy Kingdom’s prized troops. It’s unlikely they’d station any in this vassal nation so far from the front lines of the war with the Empire,” Ira said.

“But the chance of that isn’t zero.”

“True, but if they were stationed anywhere, it would be the capital city or to the northeast, near the Holy Kingdom’s homeland.”

“You guys have mentioned this mage unit on occasion. Are they that strong?” I asked.

To be honest, since I had hardly ever seen magic in action, I didn’t really get what they meant when they referred to the mage unit as their prized troops.

“Apparently, their mages aren’t all that strong individually, but they have a powerful technique called chorus magic that amplifies the effects of one spell cast by many hands,” Sylphy explained.

“Yes, that’s right. Individually, their power is less than one-third of mine. I could take five of them on,” Ira added.

“Really?”

“But when they had ten mages using this chorus magic, they were able to break my magic barrier. Yet our attacks couldn’t break theirs.”

“In other words, the more mages they have, the more fiendish they are.”

“Right. With fifty, a hundred, even two hundred of them—the more there are, the more powerful. And from behind their barriers, they send a barrage of wide-range destructive magic.”

“So they’re like a moving fort,” Sylphy said.

“A moving fort? It’d be interesting to see who was more powerful—me or them,” I mused.

If they were a moving fort, then so was I. I’d surely be a fair match, defensively speaking.

As we were discussing this, the tide of battle was steadily turning in our favor. After the walls and gate were bombed, our elite troops charged into Beta Fortress, its defenses temporarily paralyzed.

They had barely been able to get off a volley of return fire, and now two hundred elite soldiers had penetrated Beta Fortress immediately after being unilaterally beaten by our bolts and bombed on top of that. The sounds of clashing metal, shouts, and screams could be heard for a short while before they eventually subsided and we heard a resounding battle cry.

The Kingdom of Merinard’s flag rose above the—well, the gate had been completely destroyed, so they raised it above the walls.

“We won again,” Sylphy said.

“As we should have.” Ira nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Beside them, I felt speechless. The weapons and bombs I had made killed a ton of people yet again. Sylphy and the others would likely tell me to be proud, but there was part of me that couldn’t let go of the education I’d received back in Japan that valued peace as the natural way of things.

Be that as it may, life and death was normal on the battlefield. Lately, I had

come to focus on the fact that it was because of the weapons I had made that we hadn't had any casualties. I still felt bad for the Holy Kingdom's soldiers, though.

"We're going in as soon as they're done cleaning the place up. Kousuke, brace yourself."

"Uh-huh."

I know, I know, I thought. I might puke again. Hey, old man, try your best to stop trembling.

"Bluuuuurgh!"

"Mister, that's repulsive."

"I'm sorry..."

The state of Beta Fortress was more or less as I expected: a scene straight out of a slasher film. There were body parts everywhere, and the place reeked out of blood and gore. Only people who were no strangers to battle were able to stand it. It was too much for regular people like me and the merchant's crew to handle. Even the guards had gone pale.

"Was this a bit too overwhelming? Well, no one *wants* to end up like this," Melty said as she smiled at the merchant. Her radiant smile juxtaposed against the violent backdrop made for a horrific sight. There was no way she wasn't making a threat. "But you don't need to worry. Our foe is the Holy Kingdom and their military, not merchants like yourself or regular civilians."

"R-right."

"Though, of course, I cannot guarantee your safety if you continue to aid the Holy Kingdom."

"Eek!"

I averted my eyes from Melty, who looked like a cat tormenting a mouse, and decided to focus on cleaning up and outfitting the fortress. I had a feeling that the merchant was going to wind up suffering from extreme exhaustion, but unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about it. *Like they always say: let*

sleeping dogs do something or whatever. Good luck, dude.

The interior of the fortress had taken much more damage than last time. Probably because the bombs had carried farther thanks to Sylphy's wind magic. Not that it made much of a difference, since I was going to level the buildings and rebuild them anyway.

While I walked around demolishing partially destroyed buildings, I spotted soldiers from the Liberation Army gathered around a corpse draped with a cloth.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We had some casualties. The enemy had a very skilled knight among them..."

"He killed three of ours."

The Holy Kingdom's army was made up of regular humans, whereas our army was made up of demi-humans. Our folks were physically stronger, so by nature, our soldiers were superior. There was a particularly remarkable difference during melee combat.

However, there was the occasional human among their army—among humans in general—who possessed a great deal of magic power. They couldn't use enough magic to be trained as a mage, but people with lots of magic power could unconsciously strengthen their physical abilities and exhibit combat prowess far exceeding that of regular demi-humans. Those humans were treated as God's chosen few in the Holy Kingdom and were selected for the ranks of holy knight or saint.

This human had survived the bombings and then defeated three of our soldiers.

"He would have killed more of us if it weren't for Madame Zamil."

"He died in an instant when he came up against her."

She'd killed him in two strikes. After smoothly blocking his attack, she'd taken the opportunity to pierce him through the face. Madame Zamil sure was powerful...

Shaken by the downfall of their most capable fighter, the Holy Kingdom's

soldiers had collapsed. After that, the Liberation Army unilaterally pushed their way in and trampled them down.

“Our army is overwhelming,” I observed.

“Yeah. So far, we’ve been smoothly creating advantageous circumstances for ourselves and then drawing the enemy in,” Sylphy said.

“I guess so. Nothing’s really posed a threat to us so far. The harpies have been vital to our strategies.”

It had been huge how we had inferred information about the enemy in advance thanks to the harpies and the speed at which they could brief us using the golem communicators. And they were brutally powerful with their aerial bombs. Things wouldn’t have gone so smoothly for us without them.

“I wonder how far we can get before they come up with a strategy to counter them,” Sylphy said.

“I doubt they’ll come up with something that easily.”

“Agreed. But you never know; the humans do have some bright minds among them,” Ira said.

She had a point. It was possible that they’d suddenly devise a revolutionary way to deal with the harpies. We couldn’t get too careless.

Once the merchant and his crew delivered their goods to Beta Fortress, we let them go. They practically bolted. After Melty made the appropriate threats, they were sure to spread the word of how dangerous it was to oppose our Liberation Army far and wide.

We decided to let our prisoners from the Holy Kingdom’s army go as well, but only after treating them, stripping them of their equipment, and giving them the minimum amount of food and water they’d need to survive. We also took the opportunity to give them a message from us to carry.

I didn’t get to see exactly what it said, but it was a recommendation for the Holy Kingdom’s army to get out of the country—in other words, something like a declaration of war. It demanded that the Holy Kingdom leave the Kingdom of

Merinard and release its citizens, similar to the sign we had posted outside of the temporary fort previously.

“We’ll be okay, right? They aren’t going to sic their whole army on us at once because of this, are they?”

Danan shook his head. “I doubt they would have enough people to do that. Once we take out the final fortress along the border, they’ll have lost over seven thousand people. I believe that will be more than half the soldiers the Holy Kingdom has stationed in the Kingdom of Merinard. The only things they can do at this point are request aid from the mainland and try to strengthen their defenses.”

“So we can expand our territory as much as we want, then?”

“To an extent. If we take any towns, then we’ll need to divide our troops to maintain it. And our numbers are few.”

“That’s our next big hurdle, then.”

It made sense. We wouldn’t all live happily ever after just because we drove the Holy Kingdom’s army away.

Plus, there were sure to be fervent supporters of the Holy Kingdom, believers of the Church of Adol, and soldiers’ family members in the towns as well. We would have to deal with violent protests from those who were potentially against the Kingdom of Merinard and the Liberation Army.

“We’re going to have to drum up a lot of support very quickly. It’s going to be a lot of work,” Melty said.

“I’d like to believe that the original citizens of Merinard would come to our aid, but we don’t know for sure,” Sylphy added.

It had already been twenty years since the kingdom was turned into a vassal nation. There were a lot of people who would have passed away in that time and many who grew up seeing the Holy Kingdom’s occupation as a fact of life.

Twenty years was a long time. There might even be people who resented Sylphy for being a royal princess hiding away in blissful ignorance in the Black Forest for all these years, only to show up and rock the boat.

Not that Sylphy had actually been living the high life. Plus, twenty years ago, Sylphy would've been an actual kid, so I didn't think anyone had a right to criticize her. But I didn't know if people who had been oppressed for the past twenty years would feel the same way.

At any rate, we had finished capturing Beta Fortress. What happened next was the same as what we did in Alpha Fortress: gather the corpses, burn them, and then knock the whole structure back into shape. The only deviation from our usual formula was the funeral.

"Is this how the Kingdom of Merinard held funerals?"

"I would say that this is more how we hold a service for fallen soldiers," Sylphy told me.

I wasn't sure how to describe how the service went, but it was centered around a pyre. They piled up straw and logs to make something like a bed for the deceased and left offerings of alcohol, food, flowers, weapons, and a small amount of money. The offerings were burned along with them after we prayed for their souls.

"It is said that the dead who are bidden farewell in this fashion arrive at Omicle to start a new life there," Ira said, pointing upward. The big planet took up about a third of the sky.

"You see that planet as where people go after they die?"

"Yeah." Ira nodded as she looked at the blazing flames and rising smoke.

The harpies sang songs of mourning, the lamias beat improvised drums, and the beastfolk clapped their hands and hammered out a beat with their own bodies. I was overwhelmed by the sight.

It felt really primitive, but it was impressive all the same. The solemn, primal performance stirred something deep inside me, leagues beneath my conscious self. This funeral was completely different from sitting around in black suits and listening to incomprehensible sutras.

Before long, the flames died down and only ash remained. There was no trace left of the weapons and such that had been placed as offerings, nor the bones of the bodies. *Maybe because they were buried under the ash? But hmm, could*

iron weapons and bones be burned to ash in a pyre?

I found myself thinking that perhaps they had actually been sent all the way into the sky—to Omicle—because of this ceremony.

“What do you guys usually do after a ceremony?” I asked.

“A feast,” Ira said.

“We eat and drink our fill and mourn the deceased,” Sylphy added.

“I see. I guess that bit’s not too different from what I’m used to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I guess even though we live on different worlds, we’re all still human—er, I mean, still *people*, and we all still have similar customs.”

“So it seems. And we have idioms that mean similar things, too,” Sylphy said.

“Very interesting,” Ira said.

We then broke out into the feast. Today, we were gonna have all-you-can-eat steak! And alcohol! I still had a ton of gizma meat, after all!

Epilogue:

The War Will Continue...But For Now, We Rest

THE DAY AFTER we captured the fortress and held the funeral, we decided to take the day to recuperate, since we figured everyone must have been pretty wiped out. Nevertheless, some of the soldiers continued training, which made me wonder if they were okay. They said that all they had done was walk and shoot their crossbows a little, so they were fine. *Whatever floats your boat, guys.*

Less than half of them were training—no, wait, it was quite a bit of them? Less than half of them, but more than 30 percent of them were practicing, okay? They sure took their jobs seriously. As for me? Well...

“Okay, Kousuke, say ahhh.”

“Ahhh... Mmm, tasty.”

“Ahhh.”

“Yeah, yeah, here you go.”

“Mmm, yummy.”

“I-I want to feed him too.”

“Me too.”

I was busily lazing about and flirting with Ira and the harpies. An incredibly efficient way to recuperate, don't you agree? I was in heaven. I felt like my heart was being healed.

Unfortunately, Sylphy was in a meeting with Danan and Melty. Once she came back, I planned to thoroughly pamper her as a reward for working so hard. Alone. I had talked to the other ladies about it already, which explained why they were all fawning over me while they could.

I really enjoyed having everyone doting on me like this! I was starting not to care about the world I came from anymore.

I have to wonder, though, what's going on back home? How are they handling my disappearance? Did they tell people I'd suddenly died? Or that I ran away for some reason? Or is it like I never existed in the first place?

That last option was the most preferable because there would be no one to mourn me. I didn't have any siblings or parents in my life, though I did have a few close friends. It might have bothered them if I was being treated as if I died or had disappeared. That was probably the only thing I kinda regretted about this whole thing.

"Kousuke?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"You look sad. Is something wrong?"

"I do? I was just thinking about the world I came from."

Ira's and the harpies' expressions saddened.

"Do you want to go back?"

"Nah, not really. I've got all of you, so I don't miss it or anything." Especially since I always had Sylphy by my side.

"Oh, Kousuke..."

"Hee hee hee. We'll attend to your every need so you don't even have time to miss it."

"Yeah, we're family now. You just let us treat you real good, hubby."

The ladies all clung to me, and the harpies stroked me with their feathers. I had a feeling that if they kept fawning over me, I'd leech off their affection and become a total layabout. On the other hand, some men held a long-cherished desire to ruin themselves because of women. I had to be careful to make sure I didn't succumb.

"Oh," one harpy said, and I looked toward the door.

There stood a droopy-eared Sylphy looking on the verge of tears. She seemed sad to have been left out. Everyone tried very, very hard to console her.

"K-Kousuke belongs to me, understood?!" Sylphy clung to me as she cried. I

silently patted her in response.



“Yeah, we know. We were just borrowing him for a little bit,” Ira said.

“Yes, that’s right. We all know,” Pirna added.

“Waaah!”

A little while later, once she had recovered herself, Sylphy was so embarrassed that she wrapped herself in a blanket in the corner of the room and went into bagworm mode. Let me add that it took a lot more effort for us to console her again.

“You’re so cute, Big Sister Sylphy,” Ira said.

“Yes, Her Highness certainly is,” Pirna agreed.

“Stop it!” Sylphy cried.

Capri giggled. “Hee hee. If you tease her too much, she’ll become a bagworm again.”

While I agreed, I wished they would stop. I was afraid that Sylphy would become a real bagworm at this rate.

For a little bit, we forgot all about reality and bloody battles and enjoyed laughing together.

As I looked around at their smiling faces, I thought to myself, *It makes me wanna hurry up and finish this war as quickly as possible so that we can spend every day laughing just like this.*



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